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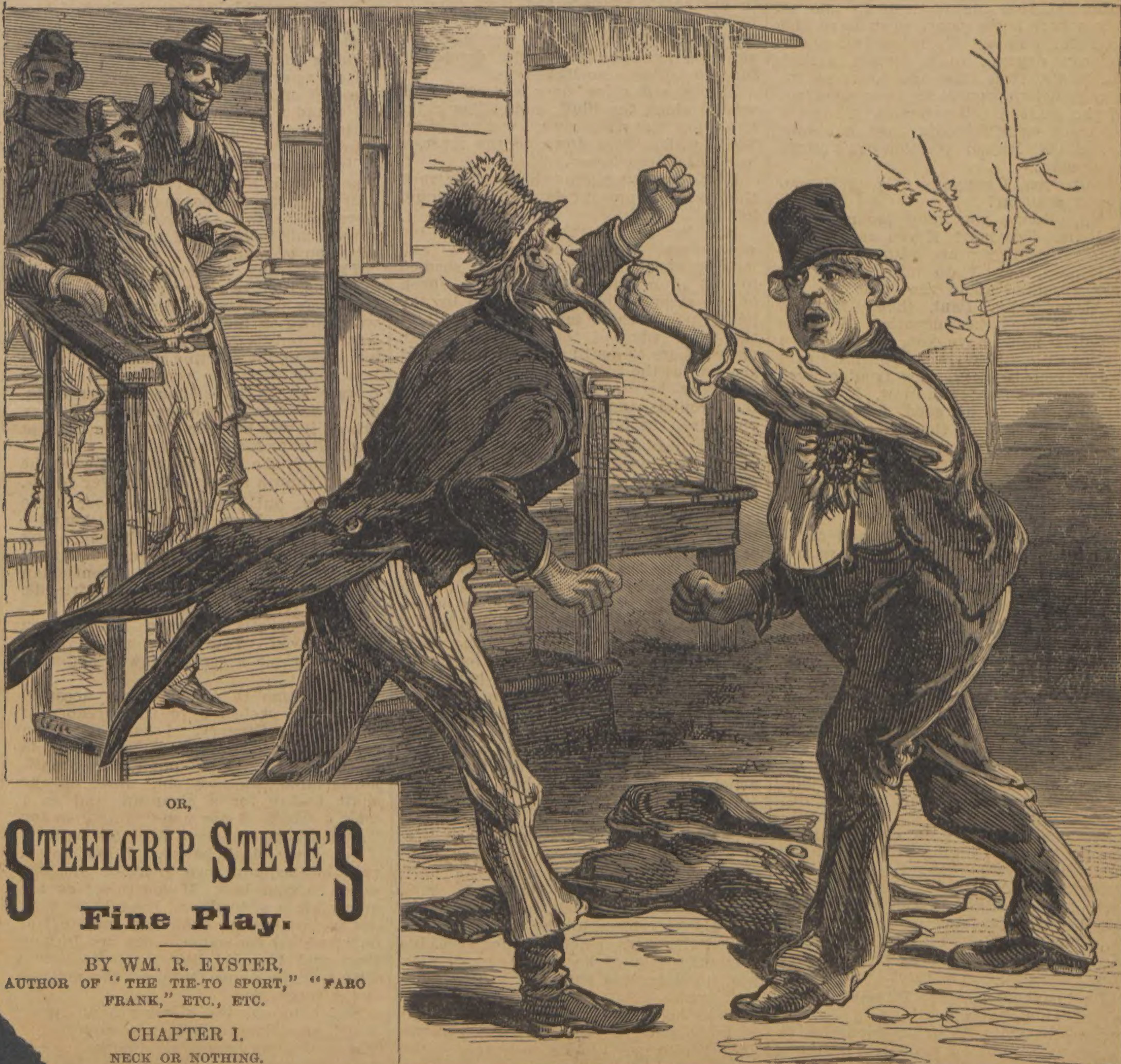
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POSY PETE, THE SUNFLOWER SPORT;



OR,

STEELGRIP STEVE'S Fine Play.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

NECK OR NOTHING.

AM sorry, your majesty, but you may
give in gracefully. I am tired of the

POSY PETE SQUARED OFF IN A WAY THAT SHOWED CONSIDERABLE SCIENCE,
WHILE HEZEKIAH, WITH CLENCHED FISTS, STRODE AT HIM.

humbleness of a wooer, and I talk to you straight. It must be so, and when you hear me say that you know what it means."

"Have done with the farce, then. If I was her majesty in reality I would say, once and for all, drop it! If the order was not obeyed I'd say, chop off his head, and yours would be rolling in the basket. You think you scent wealth—which can never be mine, much less yours. Think well whether it is safe for you to crowd me."

The two were riding side by side along the trail which led from Right Bower.

The first speaker was a man of perhaps thirty, tall, stylishly dressed, and had a darkly handsome face. Those who knew him intimately were aware that his name was Paul Wayland, but for the most part he was spoken of as Poker Paul.

His companion was a young woman of more than ordinary beauty, whose green velvet costume fitted her magnificent figure to a charm, and whose slender, daintily gloved hand controlled the actions of her nervous mustang with a skill and strength for which a stranger would hardly have given her credit.

A frown was on her handsome face, and as she spoke her eyes gleamed hotly through the thin veil which scarcely seemed to cast a shadow on her face.

At her words the man uttered a low, harsh laugh.

"Fantine, my dear, you are undoubtedly queen of the 'faro box, as I have several times found to my cost, when Satan tempted me to run up against your square little game. You have also a certain number of vassals on whom you can depend, to a certain extent. You might even raise the town on me by a judicious appeal to its prejudices. All the same, I tell you a threat is the last thing which should have left your lips. A lady in your position can't afford to threaten."

"Not even, I suppose, to a gentleman in your position?"

"No, because you know too much, or too little. Too much if you are against us, too little if you are with us."

"Pardon me. I do not profess to know anything about the 'us.'"

"About Poker Paul, then. Leaving out of account the devotion I have offered, I must have you, for my own safety's sake. From what you have said I know you could give me trouble were you so to choose; and now, if honest pleading will do no good, I tell you I must so place you that you will not care to choose. There you have it with the bark on."

He spoke doggedly, but in a way not to be mistaken.

Fantine straightened herself.

With another man, if she had cared to hear at all, she might not have objected to a masterful wooing. Though she had been on somewhat intimate terms with Poker Paul, she was not certain whether she even wanted him as a friend.

"Wayland, you ought to know that my 'no' is as good as an oath. Your past is less to me than your present, and if I must tell an unpleasant truth, I do not care a whiff for that. No word of mine would ever harm you unless uttered in self-defense. But, attempt to drive me, as you have more than half threatened, and I fight you as a man would fight. My shooting is gilt-edged, and my nerve as good as yours. Begin on me, and I sacredly swear to hunt you out, and the gang which trains behind you, and to exterminate you all. Force me to make a round-up at Right Bower, and it will be red as blood, and as scorching as fire. You wouldn't take a simple no for an answer, and there you have something else. Do your worst."

"By heavens, I will! I'll give you a taste of what that worst is."

"You coward! A loving spouse it is that you offer me—a man of a million. If I gave you a little more rope you would hang yourself before your time."

Wait! The law will do that for you. Meantime—out of my way. Press me farther in your own peculiar way and I give you a taste of—this!"

She held up her riding whip as she spoke, and shook it in his face; then she brought the whip down sharply on the shoulder of her mustang, at the same time loosening the rein.

The animal had been chafing under a taut rein, and showing ugly symptoms, which neither of the riders had noticed.

Now, it shot away with a swiftness for which they were not prepared.

It only needed a light touch of the rein to tell Fantine that it held the bit in its mouth, and intended to have its own way.

Her presence of mind did not desert here. She even smiled a little as she drew herself up in the saddle, looked to see that her foot was loose in the stirrup, and then, with hands low down, sawed firmly on the bit.

There might have been some chance; but with a sudden snap the snaffle parted in the middle! After that there was nothing to do but sit straight, and await what was to come.

For a moment after she had darted away Paul Wayland gazed after her, a black, hard look in his face; then he saw that her horse was beyond control, and without waiting to consider why, the sudden revulsion of feeling, he drove his own mustang along in hot pursuit.

At first he gained somewhat, and Fantine could hear the rapid hoof-strokes in her rear. If there had been time to think perhaps she would have considered it a dubious blessing, but just now she had her own particular danger to face, and it was no light one.

She was dashing over a trail which wound along the bluff, and to her right hand, not many feet away, was the sheer bank, which went down to the river, a hundred yards below.

If the mustang kept the beaten track there was no present danger; but, would he?

Not far beyond, the trail, none too well worn, took a sudden turn, and looking ahead, she saw where it seemed to end in nothingness, with the sheen of the river beyond, cut in two by the heavy poles which marked the limit of the outer edge of the trail, and were placed there to guard against some night accident at the turn!

Hardly breast high they were from the ground, and beyond that lay the open drop, as terrible as the scaffold.

With head down the mustang darted on, almost insensibly eating toward the outer edge of the trail. A few rods—a few yards—then, with a snort, as the rails rose in front, it crouched once in its stride, and rose madly at the slight obstruction.

Along the trail lay jagged rocks; the way was hard with cruel flint; whilst to the right the ground had already crumbled once or twice under the flying hoofs!

Only at the last moment Fantine made up her mind. She loosened her foot from the stirrup, coolly gathered her skirt up to give her movement more freedom, and, as the horse rose to the leap she sprang from his back.

But, as she leaped, she had a glimpse of a figure, seen now for the first time, which bounded toward her with outstretched arms, suddenly halted, and caught her as she fell.

Perhaps the stranger saved her life; at any rate he preserved her face from grinding cruelly down upon the hard roadbed. Though he staggered back from the sudden shock, he did not fall, nor did he release his hold at once, but placed her deliberately on her feet, his arm still around her waist, supporting her, until he was sure she had suffered no harm.

Then he stepped back, blushing, not so much from his own exertion as from a bashful sense of the presence of the beauty he had befriended.

Fantine was not entirely overcome,

but tottered a little, and held up her hands, as though trying to balance herself.

At once the young fellow who had caught her threw off his coat.

"Keep cool, keep cool!" he said, in a steady voice. "You're all right, but a little shaken up. Let me make a seat for you against that rock. Put your hand on my shoulder, please."

She yielded to his guidance. To tell the truth, she was more shaken up mentally than she cared to admit.

"Thank you," she said, as she sank on the seat which he swiftly prepared for her.

"Now, if you will please see what has become of my poor horse—or at least try to—you will put me thoroughly at ease. In a minute or two I will be myself again."

The young man turned toward the rail, and as he did so caught a glimpse of Poker Paul coming down the slope at a gallop.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND AND A FOE.

Faro Fantine looked curiously after the young stranger who had come to her rescue.

In the course of an adventurous life she had been befriended more than once, and every time had paid the party back loyally. As likely as not the time would come when she could benefit this unknown friend. If so, he could call on her and she would not have forgotten him.

So she was thinking as she looked him over, and something like a smile struggled back to her full lips, the color returning with it.

He was evidently not the sort to whom she had of late been accustomed.

He had a fresh, honest face, withal a little burned and darkened by sun and wind.

He was coarsely dressed; his shirt, of blue flannel, giving evidence of numerous washings, was scrupulously clean, as were his overalls, while the heavy brogans on his feet showed an attempted application of polish.

The clothing did not interest her as much as the young man himself. Fantine was accustomed to friends who were down on their luck; the young man was not only something of a tenderfoot, but back at the starting place had doubtless come from the country. He knew more of green fields than of green cloth, and if not a regular attendant of Sunday School it was because there was none at Right Bower for him to go to.

So much she had thought out when he turned from a survey of the river below.

"Sorry, but I suspect the poor brute drove right down into the quicksand—and stayed there. It's a bad bottom along here, and it's heaven's mercy you didn't go over with him. There's a gentleman coming I reckon is one of your friends. Perhaps I'd better pass on."

"Wait, wait! I have never even thanked you. Your name, please. You have done me a service I will not soon forget."

"My name is not of much account, but you're welcome to it. Gregory it is—Thomas Gregory. I have not been here long, and don't know many people in the town. I work out at the Small-hopes mine, but they shut down on our shaft to-day for a clean-up, and so I took a stroll. I am none the worse for it, and I hope you are a little the better."

"A great deal better. I am not a valuable acquaintance to make, and not at all in your line. If you called on me at my place of business, I would be very apt to break your head and tumble you out; but, all the same, I am not forgetting, and I would like to shake hands with you, just once, to show I'm not going to forget you."

She held out the slender hand, from which the glove had been removed, and the soft, but nervous, fingers closed around his in a solid pressure that his heart to beating in a way he w

not have liked her to know. He was a boy to her, though probably several years the older; to him she had suddenly become the one woman in the world, though but to precious few of the sex had he spoken since he came to man's estate!

"I don't hope you will need me again; but if you do I do hope I'll be on hand," he said, as their grasping palms loosened, and just then Paul Wayland drew in his horse sharply, and sprang to the ground, with a growl:

"If your high and mighty airs had broken your neck it wouldn't have been worse than you might have expected, and it's a half pity you didn't. Where's your horse?"

"My horse seems to be down in the bed of the river. It is reported he is invisible. You might look and see for yourself."

Gregory had been inclined to withdraw—would probably have done so had it not been for Wayland's aggressive tone and manner.

He had drawn back a little, and now stood looking on, his face angrily flushing, though conscious of the fact it was not for him to interfere.

Paul cast one scowling glance in his direction, and then made answer:

"I'll take your word for it. I saw him go over the rail; and for about ten seconds thought you had gone along with him. Better pay your gallant, give him his coat, and let him go; he may catch cold holding his ears open."

"You are still in Satan's humor, are you? I don't think I need your advice or assistance. It is not far to Right Bower, and I prefer to walk the course alone. Will you please consider that your dismissal?"

"Don't be a fool. I'm not done with our talk yet, and here is as good a place to have it out as any. Young man, as virtue, when it is its own reward, turns out a mighty poor one, I don't blame you for hanging around, but just now your room would be better than your company. I've no coin with me, but you call around at my rooms in an hour and I'll have a ten to hand you. You look as though you needed it, and I'm always ready to do the square thing."

"You thunderin' scoundrel, you! Talk as you're a mind to to me, and it don't count; but if you don't apologize to the lady for your words and manner, and allow her to go her own way as she desires, I'll make you!"

The young man was red and white alternately, and the savage way he glared at the gambler might have made another man wince.

To Paul it was something like a douche of ice water, and the very thing he needed to steady his nerves.

His lips curved in a scornful smile as he answered:

"Sonny, I believe you are more than half right. My requests to Queen Fantine should be more delicately worded, whilst my orders to you ought to be put in a more positive shape. Pardon me for seeming harshness, but if you are within a hundred yards at the end of the next minute and a half I shall certainly break your neck."

And Poker Paul proceeded airily to turn up his cuffs.

"One moment, if you please, Paul."

Miss Fantine had her arms folded, and her handsome face set as near to a frown as it could come.

"I happen to be a friend to this gentleman, and I don't propose that you shall try any of your neck-breaking experiments on him. It is possible he could take his own part very well, but in this case the burden of defense should rest with me, and I mean to assume it. You know whether my word goes or not, and I assure you solemnly that if you attempt to put your threat in execution I will shoot you dead at the second step. Are you on?"

"Very much on, and as it would be a little too highly strung for even Right Bower if I were to proceed to murder you

both, I simply beg you to have your own way. The gentleman will keep, as no doubt I will have an opportunity of seeing him later on."

"Later on, or now, or at any time!" roared Gregory, almost bursting with rage, yet restrained from immediate attack by the presence of the lady.

"Hush!" interrupted Fantine. "Mr. Wayland is in a bad humor, and we must make some allowance. He has just lost a valuable horse, which I know he will not allow me to pay for—"

"Then, perhaps he will permit me. It may have been my fault, and I wouldn't care to be in debt to him. How much was the creature worth?"

He drew out a wallet as he spoke; in another moment he would have had it open.

"There, there, my friend! You have done enough, and perhaps more than enough for comfort; let it drop. A respectable sort of knight errant will obey fair lady's requests. Good day, and my thanks go with you."

"Your orders are law," said the young man coolly, raising his hat with considerable grace, and with his coat flung over his arm he stalked away without a single glance at the gambler.

When he was gone Paul Wayland stared at Fantine, his face black as a thundercloud. For once he had been bluffed, and that was not altogether a pleasant thing for him to know.

"Don't look so murky, old man," laughed the young lady, not caring to carry the quarrel farther at that time and place.

"After he had just saved my life—or, at least, this beautiful face of mine—did you suppose I was going to allow him to fall a victim to your tender mercies? Not if this court knows himself, and I was glad to see you knew when to quit."

"Quit? The thing hasn't begun yet. The next time we meet I'll just turn him over my knee and break him all apart."

"And you'll never be more surprised in your life than when you try that thing on. You are an awkward man in a row, and handy with the tools, but I suspect if the youngster ever hits you he'll break your neck. Best leave him alone."

"Yes, when I get done with him."

"See here, Paul; you drop it! I am in earnest, and I can't afford to cheapen myself with talk. It's my last warning. Now, let's go back to Right Bower. This has been a confounded poor pleasure party."

The gambler looked as though he would return a hot answer, but he contained himself, and with his bridle rein over his arm he paced along by her side, Fantine having refused to mount his horse.

But their conversation was not very exhilarating, and it was not exactly as friends that they finally parted.

CHAPTER III.

TWO OF A KIND.

That same afternoon, and probably but a short time before Faro Fantine and her escort set out from Right Bower, on the ride which was destined to stop so suddenly, a man neared the bend where the mustang subsequently came to grief.

He walked a trifle wearily, as though his journey had been long, and perhaps unpleasant, and his general appearance seemed to give him away as a man destined to prove a hard citizen, if Right Bower accepted him.

Nevertheless, there was a certain jaunty air of self-possession about him that made one look at him twice.

It is true he seemed to be a tramp, and one with whom hard work had never made friends. His garments were dusty, travel stained, and beginning to be threadbare, but they had not yet reached the point of raggedness the typical tramp seems to delight in.

His headgear was really the most dis-

reputable thing about him, for though it had originally been a "plug hat," it had become like chaos, without form and void, through much battering.

The vest, which seemed to have never a button on it, was thrown back, so as to show a large expanse of well-worn and considerably soiled white muslin shirt, and he carried his coat over his arm.

He looked, however, as though life had not used him altogether roughly, nor, in fact, as badly as he deserved, for his cheeks, which were clean shaven, fairly bulged out with fatness, and the corporation he carried in front of him would have done service for about three New York aldermen.

He had a coarse face, with almost a vacuous expression when it was studied. Altogether, at first sight, one might have said there were a dozen of his kind already in Right Bower, had it not been for one thing, which gave him an identity of his own.

Pinned on his left breast was a huge sunflower, which had become so much a matter of course that he no longer gave it even a casual glance.

It seemed as though it had always been there.

As he approached the bend he began to look wearily around, and finally his eye lit upon the very thing he wanted—a comfortable resting place.

He was too old a hand to want to sit out in the sunshine that warm afternoon; nor did he seem to care to prop himself against the rocks by the side of the trail, where he might obtain a dubious sort of shadow.

But his eyes rested upon a niche in the rocks, some eight or ten feet above, which seemed the very thing he was after.

He measured the distance with a downward glance, and calculated the difficulties of the ascent with another upward sweep of his eyes.

"Ther spot I war lookin' fur, by guns!" he muttered, as he turned aside.

"Dry, cool, an' retired—'speshully retired. Don't look ez though thar war a man 'long hyer fur a week, an' I ain't a heapin' dirt on me charakter by bein' seen loafin' by ther roadside. An' I swear by Moses, I gotter have some rest afore I tackle Right Bower. I'm jest about melted down to a grease spot, an' ef I don't take time ter cool ther fat'll begin ter fry."

So he grumbled to himself as he attacked the ascent, which he was gratified to find was not as difficult as expected.

Without much delay or effort he clambered up a few steps, and just as he had fairly placed his hands on the ledge for which he was reaching he heard a sound that caused him to halt a trifle, and then draw himself up with a caution he had not hitherto displayed.

The sound was that of an unmistakable snore.

There had certainly been no one in view from below, and in spite of what he had said the fat man had not thought the niche so commodious as to completely shelter a human being.

But the human being was there, as he had optical evidence on looking into the niche.

The rock to which he was holding sloped downward from the front, and the cavity was at least half a dozen feet deep.

The first thing which rose into view was a white, bell-crowned hat, and it was from behind that the sounds proceeded.

As he drew himself farther up, and peered into the cavity, he saw the tips of a pair of boots, which might be number thirteen, men's size, but looked four or five sizes longer, even, than that.

They were propped up on a ledge, so as to get them a trifle higher than their owner's head. Between them and the hat was a distance that could be measured by yards, and it was occupied by a figure the very reverse of that of the man outside.

The tramp drew himself up still farther, and looked down at face and form:

then he rubbed his own smooth cheek with one of his enormous hands.

"Don't look desp'rit, an' I reckon, ef I nudge him over a bit he won't perceed ter violence. Mebbe, though, I'd better find out who he are afore I bunks in. He's a daisy fur looks, an' that are a fack. Lemme rouse him."

As far as he could see the man appeared to have no weapons about him, and chuckling as he did so the intruder leaned over and applied his thumb and forefinger firmly to the nose of the snorer.

The arousal was not as complete as he fancied it would be. The sleeper stirred uneasily, and as the pressure increased drawled out:

"Gosh hang ett, Almyry, don't!"

"He's callin' me Almyry, sure," chuckled the fat man, his eyes dancing with glee.

"An' why wouldn't I?" he continued, confidentially addressing his victim.

"Jewhilikins!" exclaimed the sleeper, suddenly becoming wide awake and starting up. "Who be yew?"

Perhaps he let out a few more links than he had intended, for the crown of his hat came against the rock-roof, and was forced down over his eyes and face so that nothing was left visible of his head but his sharp, pointed chin, from which stuck out a sharper pointed beard.

"Don't git excited, pard. I reckon, mebbe, yer a stranger in these parts, an' perhaps ain't heard ov Posy Pete, there Sunflower Sport. I'm him."

"Ther nashun yer say!" said the other, managing to raise his hat a trifle by seizing it at the brim with both hands.

"I'll show yew sport when I git this dingblasted beaver off'n my eyes. Dog-gone yew, what wuz yew thinkin' tew dew?"

"Don't hurry yerself, pard; thar's plenty ov time ter explain. Yer hev'n't interdoosed yerself, er I might be a help-in' ov yer. What might be ther royal handle by w'ich they calls yer ter dinner, ef they ever do call yer."

"Hezekiah Coffin, o' Nantucket an' Marthy's Vineyard, an' a name I ain't ashamed tew own. It goes for a heap when its owner's tew hum."

Posy Pete chuckled softly.

"Fur a coffin yer do look monst'us out ov perporshun. Fourteen foot one way, an' two inches t'other, more er less. Right shape ter bury a fishin' pole in. Yer a line, that's what you be, all len'th an' no bre'dth er thickness. All exceptin' ther feet."

"Them feet air paid fur, an' when they get fair room accordin' to the'r size the reach ov'em air s'prisin'."

"Don't git huffy. I war jest takin' a invoice. Kinder goin' over yer p'int's ter see ef I had ary man like you on me books. This hyer leetle meetin' might be wuth a thousand dollars—ef you happened ter be ther right man. Jest hold on a holy minnit. Suthin' strikes me. Wait till I looks at yer 'fotygraff."

"Where did yew git my 'fotygraff, gosh hang ye?"

Hezekiah Coffin suddenly bristled up, but Pete answered never a word. Feeling in his coat pocket, which he found with some little difficulty, from the fact that he was sitting on it, he drew out a wallet. This he opened, and began looking over the contents with careful scrutiny, muttering to himself as he looked:

"Hum! One hundred dollars reward! Hoss thief, short an' fat—that's not it. Escaped from jail, a wun-eyed mulatter—no, he ain't a dinky. Eh! How's this? Tall, lanterned jawed, wears number eighteen an' three-quarter boots, an' a high, white hat. Sharp nose, scraggly hair, an' villainous feezyognominy. Wanted fur killin' a small cripple an' robbin' ther corpus ez aforesaid ov—"

He stopped suddenly and looked suspiciously at his companion.

Hezekiah had brought out a wallet that looked as though it might be a duplicate of his own; and he, too, had begun to read from one of a number of little handbills he had unfolded, the most

of them having "Reward" at the top in large letters.

"By gum, it fits tew a charm. 'Five hundred dollars reward! Five foot six high, six foot five through, kerries a sunflower on his left breast, an' a strawberry mark on his right arm. Stole a hoss frum Leander Martin.' By gosh, I be'leve I got him."

Posy Pete's eyes began to bulge out when he saw that wallet; and as he listened his under jaw dropped.

Suddenly he thrust out one enormous paw, with the stubby fingers all wriggling.

"Putt ett thar, pard; putt ett right thar. I see your wun ov 'em, too."

"One what?" asked Hezekiah, cautiously.

"Tective," whispered Pete, bending forward till his lips almost touched the ear of the other.

"P'rhaps; but in this thing it air best tew go slow. Lemme see yewr kyard."

Without more ado Pete took out a card. It was printed on red, stiff pasteboard, and at the top bore the legend, "Bulger's Arizona Detective Agency."

"Right yew air," said Hezekiah, producing a duplicate. "Heur's mine. Heow did yew git it?"

"Paid 'em ten dollars ter lemme j'ine; an' they sent me down hyer ter look fur Cap'n Diamond, ther boss road-agent, more speshully; but I'm ter keep a eye out fur all that's in ther ring. I needn't tell yer I'm in disguise."

"Waal, I sweow! Ef all that story don't fit me tew a charm. So be I."

"Be yer heeled?"

Hezekiah carefully pulled up the right leg of his trousers until the top of his bootleg appeared. The action disclosed the butt of a pistol protruding.

As though moved by instinct, Pete went through the same performance—and, lo! he carried a revolver in the same place.

"Thar's whar they tole me I'd better keep ett; an' I must say ett ain't ez wear-in' ez in a belt. You an' me are shore goin' ter run in double harness. But say, how are yer off fur coin? Ett's a scand'lous fack, but I'm clean, dead busted."

"So air me," answered Hezekiah, sadly. "Ez we kim deown heur tew benefit the kentry, they ought tew be willip' tew see us through tell we make a reward. Ett's ten thousand on Diamund—an', strickly speakin', I mout say ez he war my meat."

"Er mine, yer better be sayin'. I don't object ter yer takin' ther wun-eyed mulatter. That's a hundred; an' he's a mighty desp'rit case. Ef yer kin git him you'll hev no end ov glory."

"Ding blast yewr glory, it air coin thet I'm after."

"That's right. In Right Bower ett's cash down er no grub. What we goin' ter do 'bout ett right now?"

"Ett's 'offle, fur a fack; an' me with a clue tew ten thousand dollars!"

"Hush!"

Pete held up his hand in warning for silence, and the two could hear quite plainly the approaching footsteps of a pedestrian.

"Thar's yer wind fur ther shorn lam's. Say, he's comin' right erlong frum ther Smallhopes mine, an' I'll bet his pockets are jest jam full ov dust. We got ter go through him."

"Eh! An' me wun'st a canderdate ez deacon tew the Baptis' Church, an' now a member ov Bulger's Detective Agency! Tell me that?"

The tone of indignant surprise had no effect on Pete of the posy.

"Can't help ett. Ett's died dorg, er eat ther hatchet. We kin do ett easy ez rollin' off'n a log. Git rididy. I'll draw a bead on him, an' sing out. When he hol's his han's up you jump down and rustle him."

Pete drew and cocked his revolver with every appearance of earnestness, and there is no telling what would have happened had it not been for the sound of nearing hoof-strokes, which put quite another face on the matter.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST SKIRMISH OF THE WAR.

"That settles ett," sighed Hezekiah, evidently relieved.

"We kain't dare tew molest him now."

"I dunno. Lay low an' keep dark. Thar's no tellin' what's goin' ter happen."

In this Posy Pete was not far wrong. Neither of them had an idea of what was going to happen, and as they peeped cautiously out from their hiding place they saw a great deal that was unexpected.

They were unseen witnesses to the narrow escape of Faro Fontine, and overheard the conversation which followed.

"By gravy, he's pure san'—stun grit, that young feller," whispered Coffin, as he saw Thomas Gregory stalking away, after having successfully and without damage bluffed Poker Paul.

Posy Pete's answer was a poke in the ribs with the point of his elbow, that quite took away the breath of his companion.

"Quiet, blast ye! That poker chap hez eyes like gimblets, an' ef he heard a single peep they'd bore a hole through a 'leven-inch rock, an' send a chunk ov lead whar it'd do ther most good. Lay low, blame ye."

"Who's a talkin', yew er yewr gran'-pap? Gol' blast yew, d'yew think all ther chin music air tew be on wun side?"

There did seem to be some grounds for indignation, as Pete's tongue ran, if anything, the freer; but the sunflower man did not intend to allow any such controversy. He darted out his pudgy fingers, and before Hezekiah knew what they were after they had closed around his throat.

"Shell I, er shan't I? You say, pardner. Ef I ain't runnin' this thing I want ter know. 'Nother word out en yer dog-gone lantern jaws, an' I'll choke yer black an' throw yer into the river."

"Mum she air; fur goodness sakes, don't."

After that the two kept silent until Fan and her escort had a fair start on their homeward way. Then they scrambled down to the trail. Neither cared to share the niche with any one else, and in that way it happened they left it together.

Once down and the two looked at each other as though there was a mutual desire for a scrap.

"Gosh, hang yew, fur half a cent I'd smash yewr durned gizzard open," growled Hezekiah, glaring over his shoulder at the sunflower man. "Tried tew choke me, did yew?"

"Ef I had ther half cent I'd hire ye ter do the job, but ef yer feels like havin' real fun, all fur nothin', now's yer time."

He doubled up his fists as though about to proceed, himself, to active measures, and Coffin gave a great stride backward, and braced himself for the attack.

It did not come, however.

Posy Pete took half a dozen steps in the other direction, with a grunt of surprised gratification, and suddenly snatched up something from the ground.

"Don't ett beat ther Dutch?" he exclaimed in triumph. "An' I'd a bin buck-in' up ag'in that young tenderfoot, what hed more sand than dingbats ef ett hedn't bin fur restrainin' grace. I'll hev Dimund now, sure ez eggs are eggs. All I wanted war a leetle capital ter kerry me erlong, an' now I got dead doodles ov ett. Jimminy! Ain't ett a sight fur sore eyes?"

Hezekiah watched him at first with some anxiety, uncertain as to his meaning, but when he began to talk the man from Nantucket strode up and looked anxiously over Pete's shoulder, with a greedy, covetous glare in his eyes.

The article Posy Pete had picked up was a small purse, rather dainty in appearance, from which he had abstracted a thick little roll of bills, the ends, as he turned them over, showing no figure less than twenty.

"Sav, Pete, be we nards, er don't we be? Thar'll be a big reward fur ther findin' ov that, an' I order hev a sheer."

"Reward be jiggered. Who's keerin' fur reward? In course we's pards, an' we'll hev ther hull ov it."

He thrust the notes into his pocket as he spoke, and then, turning, gave the empty purse a fling which carried it far out into the river.

"Not the 'hull on it, Pete. That wouldn't be right; an' me w'unst bein' a candidate fur deacon—"

"Dog gon ye, drap that. You'll take yer full-sized half ez I give ett to yer er you'll croak. Sabbe?"

Right into line with Hezekiah's head swung Pete's revolver, with a celerity which showed he had been having it in some handier receptacle than his boot-leg.

Hezekiah wilted at the sight.

He clasped his hands and looked ready to go down on his knees.

"So let ett be, pardner. Ez I cain't see heow tew do much else, consider me a lam' riddy for the sacryfize. I will accept the half. Heow much is it?"

The final question was asked with a rapid anxiety which showed how his thoughts were running.

"Never you mind how much she are. You'll find that when I gits riddy to spud ett out. We're jest fixed fur Right Bower, now, an' we'll git thar in three hops ov a mount'in flea. We'll hev a stack ov grub fust off, an' ter-night paint that town red. Time ernough ter-morrer ter set trott-lines fur dandy Capt'n Diamond."

"Red air no name for ett," said Coffin, solemnly.

"When Hezerkiah H. Coffin do cut loose he goes ther hull hog, you jist bet. Kim on."

With their difference thus for the time adjusted, the two turned their steps toward Right Bower, and being buoyed up with the prospect of a full stomach each man stepped out lively.

As they neared the town, but just before coming in sight of it, an' idea struck Pete, which he was not slow in communicating.

"Say, pard, ef we's ter work tergether mabbe it wouldn't be jest best ter give ther snap away. Hedn't we better kim in ez strangers, in two detashments, an' different quarters?"

"My idea tew a charm. I'd a sed so, but I feared yew might answer onpleasant."

"All right. Hyer's a twenty, tell yer needs more. Skun out, an' I'll be an arrovall later on."

Hezekiah took the bill without farther reference to the time when he was candidate for the honors of deacon, and passed on. Before long he had entered the town, and was striding along the principal street with an importance which might signify an ownership of the entire camp.

Being, to express it, "holler clean deown tew ther boots," it did not take him long to find a place which he thought was the one he wanted.

If he had gone farther he might have fared better, but the front of the building bore the legend, "Lodging and Meals at all hours," and without hesitation he entered.

"I reckon this air the place I air look-in' for," he said, stalking up to the counter in one corner, which, however, looked more like a bar than a counter.

"I see yeou 'vertiss meals at all hours, an' I feel ez ef I kin dew jestiss tew 'em fur several at least. Kin yew hev one riddy purty tol'rabble quick? I ain't a keerin' so much what, so there's plenty ov ett."

The man behind the bar looked Hezekiah over sharply.

The greater part of the meals furnished there were imbibed from the bottles ranged on the shelves behind him, but thy did set up a feed when it was called for, and the possible profits seemed to justify.

The aspect of Hezekiah was encouraging, provided he had the collateral. In fact, he seemed to be of the kind that was fair game, and out of which Bolly Welch

was accustomed to make all the traffic would bear, and sometimes try for a trifle more.

"It kin be done, old man, but we'll hev ter charge yer a leetle extry, ez ther fire's down, an' you come all by yer lonesome self."

"Wael, I ain't ov ther grumblin' kind; but git a russel on. I'm aenamost starved. Yew might hand deown a leetle gin, bein' ez I hev to wait, an' ort tew stay my in'ards."

Bolly reached behind him for a bottle, which he placed on the edge of the counter nearest him, holding tight to the neck, while he looked at Coffin in a way the latter could not help but feel was suspicious.

It said as plain as could be that the sight of his money was the next thing in order.

Hezekiah was willing. He drew out his note with a flourish and cast it down. At the same time the bottle was passed, and Hezekiah did not hesitate, but tossed off three fingers before Bolly fairly had the paper straightened out.

What followed next was an eye-opener for Coffin. He saw a sudden change come over the face of the man behind the bar, who looked up savagely as he shouted:

"Hyer, you! That's too thin. You can't shove that queer in this shack. Shove over about two bits, good, solid coin, er there'll be war right hyer."

"W-W-what dew yew mean?" stammered Hezekiah, taken aback, and staring helplessly at Welch.

"Kiver him, Tommy," yelled Welch, paying no attention to the question.

"Kivered she am," growled a man sitting on the other side of the room, and who had said nothing up to the present time.

As he spoke he swung out his revolver, drawing back the hammer with his thumb as it came, and getting a dead line on Hezekiah with neatness and despatch. Then, he took time to add:

"What's gone bust, Bolly?"

"Tryin' ter beat ther house with a bad note, that's what's wrong."

"A bad note? That's queer," gasped Coffin, as much puzzled as horrified by the turn things had suddenly taken.

"It's most blamed queer, but I'll see thet yer don't play thet game some more. Cuss ye, kick ef yer wants ter, an' we'll skin yer alive."

As he spoke, Bolly hastily smeared some paste over the back of the note, and then plastered it against the wall with a resounding whack.

"That settles that. Now, you shell out ther coin fur that drink, an' then travel."

"But I ain't got no other coin," drawled Coffin, looking askance at the green splotch on the wall.

"Then, I'm takin' pay outen yer head!" and Bolly grabbed up the cudgel he always had handy, and made a rush around the end of the bar.

"An' I tell yew, ef yew don't intend tew change ett I want my bill."

Hezekiah had nerve, at any rate; and was beginning to get mad. He bent over and began to yank up the leg of his trousers in search of his pistol, and would probably have got it out before Bolly arrived had it not been for an interference that made his case rather hopeless.

As he stooped he presented a fair mark to Tommy, who could not resist the temptation. In spite of the diminutive to his name, Tommy was a burly ruffian, and not particularly tender-hearted. He swung his foot once, and then let drive with all the vigor he could muster.

"O-h-a-w! Gosh all hemlock!" screamed Hezekiah, as he literally rose in the air, propelled by that terrible kick, so unexpectedly applied; and then, as he landed, and tried to straighten himself up, the two were upon him.

They were both adepts in the art of bouncing, and almost before the luckless victim could utter another sound they had rushed him to the door, and each swinging a foot, they sent him sprawling across the porch, and into the street.

There is no telling how much farther he would have gone had he not collided with a stout man, in shirt sleeves, who was swaggering along, his coat over his arm.

This man, of course, was Posy Pete. The two went down together, and there they sat, feet to feet, facing each other.

"Jupiter jump up!" exclaimed Pete; "what fur why yer done thus?"

"Yew ask, dumb ye! I mought a knowed yew war playin' roots on me, with yer bercussed keer we shouldn't strike town tewgether, an' yer jiner'us sheerin' ov what warn't yewrn ner mine. Yew knowed ett! Yew did ett a pu'ppus; an' I'll hev satisfackshun outen yewr blamed pork chops. Ef yewr a man stan' up an' take yewr beltin'."

"Say, yer clean gone plumb crazy, but that don't cut no ice. Yer hev axed fur a lammin', an' a lammin' you'll git. Put yer han's up, I'm goin' ter hit yer."

The two were mad as hornets, and sprung to their feet together.

Posy Pete squared off in a way that showed considerable science, whilst Hezekiah, with clinched fists, strode at him. Both seemed ready for the fray.

CHAPTER V.

STRIKING A CLUE.

The racket between the two strangers was something not down in the original bills. Bolly Welch, Tommy, and several others, watched the affair with grinning delight.

Fortunately, perhaps, they did not hear the conversation passing between the antagonists, and so were not enlightened as to the true condition of affairs between them.

What they saw was a pair of brawlers, advancing on each other with what seemed true, bulldog courage.

Each man had his advantages and his disadvantages, and there was no betting among the outsiders.

Pete was undoubtedly the more scientific and the stouter built, but he was too fat for a hard fight, and Hezekiah had the advantage in height and reach.

Coffin was the first to strike out—an awkward, swinging hit, too round to do much damage unless it landed on a vital point.

Pete parried and countered straight as a die. It was the very unscientific delivery of the Yankee which saved him from going over into the middle of next week. He had not let himself out along with his blow, and so the fist of Posy never reached him, his head being suddenly dodged back out of harm's way.

Immediately afterward the Yankee gave a backward spring which carried him several yards away, at the least.

But it was not with an idea of retreating the retrograde movement was made.

On the contrary, he came on again, with a rush and a howl, suddenly leaping into the air with a most prodigious bound, his feet shooting up at the same time, until they were almost on a level with his head.

Posy met the attack gamely, since he had no time to dodge. One blow he struck, but that was cast aside by a motion of the long arms, which were going like the sails of a windmill, and around his neck clasped the long legs of Hezekiah Coffin.

The shock was too great for him to resist, sturdy as he was, and down he went, Hezekiah rolling over his head as he struck the ground.

Both on the ground, and Pete was as active as the other. Almost before the watchers, who were frantic with delight, could see how it happened, the two were facing each other on their knees, each with a grip on the throat of the other.

"Now, you blamed igeot, tell me what she's all about. Jest recommember, I got ther rest ov ther boodle."

Pete was cool as a cucumber, though he hissed these words at his partner in a way calculated to make his blood run cold.

"That's jest it. That air bill wuz

counterfeit, an' when I tried tew pass it they gathered it in an' fired me eout."

"Ett's a high-blasted lie, an' they wor playin' roots on yer. Why ther Jupiter jim-crank don't yer play ter git even with them, 'stid ov tryin' ter take ett outen me, yer best frien' an' on'y backer?"

"He pasted ett up ag'in the wall, an' kim at me with a club."

"That war jest one ov the'r dodges ter skun a lamb like you. I know 'em all, thick as fleas on a yaller dog. You jest spunk up ter 'em, an' we'll show 'em who kerries ther queer."

All at once it struck Hezekiah he had been victimized by the man behind the bar. The thought turned all his anger in that direction.

"Partner, yew air right," he said, with sudden calmness. "We'll go in an' make ett rale warm fur 'em."

"Then, foller me, an' come a-shoutin'."

All this time there was nothing to show to the outside world that a truce was established, and when Pete suddenly sprung up and rushed wildly away with Hezekiah in pursuit no suspicion of the truth entered the mind of Bolly Welch. Before he could make up his mind to stop him Pete had darted into the house.

"Hyer! hyer! Stay out ov that, don't yer know!" he shouted, and followed in. He did not intend to allow a man of such appearance to roam unrestricted among his bottles.

He even momentarily forgot Hezekiah, until recalled to his existence by feeling sinewy fingers clutching viciously at his collar, and bearing him along toward the counter.

"Say, dog gun yew, I want my change, an' ett's the on'y time ov askin'."

Caught at such a disadvantage, Bolly was simply a child in those nervous hands, which shook him, and finally, lifting him clear off the floor, swung him around, as a barrier against Tommy and the others, who were rushing in at the door.

There was a better barrier than that, however.

Posy Pete was surveying the crowd with a benignant smile, but he had a pistol in each hand.

"Pards," he said calmly, "yer wants ter lis'sen ter me. I'm Posy Pete, ther Sunflower Sport, an' a great big tin dragon on wheels. I'm jest a takin' a hand in this game fur ther sake ov fair play, an' I'll have that same last ef I hev ter shoot. You hear me?"

"Shoot him down, Tommy; shoot him down!" yelled Welch; but, with the drop on him, Tommy would have preferred backing out of the room altogether, had not Pete sternly called a halt.

"Ett's jest this hyer way. My pard thar wants his change, an' he's goin' ter hev ett. Tell yer story, ole man, an' ef yer don't git jestiss s'uthin's goin' ter break."

Hezekiah needed no further urging, though he still held on to his prisoner.

When he got through, Pete pointed to the wall.

"Thar's ther bill, now; but it'd kim down mighty quick arter tenderhuff jumped ther town. Ef thar's a expert in camp call him up, an' ef he don't say ett's good goods I'll eat him."

It may have been fortunate that a number of spectators had come on the scene, and that some of them were honest men. Bolly knew he was caught, since his friends would not, and he could not, break up the investigation in a fight. Coffin was holding him, in spite of prodigious efforts, as calmly as though he was a six-months' infant.

Bolly knew he was suspected of worse tricks than this, and, though nervy enough when he had a chance, did not believe in ruining his business, even if he had to make a square backdown.

"Oh, I war jest a-playin' off on ther greeny, an' ett would a-bin all right ef he hadn't tried ter mop ther earth up. When he started ther circus goin' 'thout a'vin a chance ter fix ett up we furgot all about his blamed old bill, an' waltzed him ou. ter cool off. He kin hev ett."

"Ett ta'int my bill ett tall; ett air yewrs. Ett are my change I'm after."

"Let up, all ov yer, an' I'll fix ett, though ther drinks orter be on me fur ther house—an' so they be. Honor bright, I'll do the squar' thing soon as yer lets go."

Hezekiah might have had his doubts, but Pete was running the thing, and at a word from him Bolly was released. He darted behind the bar and made the right change for Hezekiah, and set out his vials for the benefit of the crowd, without another word.

"An' a man ov sand he are," said Pete, pointing to his partner.

"Not to speak ov his tacklin' our frien' ther proprietor all alone, he war willin' ter mount me—Posy Pete, ther great Sunflower Sport. Hyer's to him; an' ez this ranch jest about suits my style, what's ther matter fur us ter settle hyer regular? Eh, pard, you don't bear no malice?"

"Nit a bit," answered Bolly, with outward show of frankness. "Ef this shack seems ter be about your gait ketch right on."

"All right; but no tricks on travellers, don't yer know. Fur frien'ly fun I'm soft ez mush an' milk; but crowd me an' yer finds a hard man frum 'way back."

It is unnecessary to give the rest of the particulars of the jubilee. Coffin was not at first struck with the idea of locating there, but a sign from Pete brought him around to acquiescence, and the crowd found him not the worst company in the world.

Supper came later on for the two strangers, together with several others who either boarded there or were attaches of the house.

It was not until darkness had settled down, and the two had left, ostensibly to view the town, that Hezekiah had a chance to unburden himself.

"Ef ett wuz my say so I sweow I wud never go back. They looks ez though they'd pizon a fellow ef they hed the chaine."

"Hush! Don't yer try ter teach yer gran'mother how ter dance. I knowed what I war up to when I snuggled down ez ef I war a sick kitten goin' fur a hot brick."

"Wael?"

"Well, blame yer, I ain't come down hyer ter look fur Diamund 'thout a clue, and Bolly Welch are ett. Betcher sweet life Bolly gives ett away, too, when I turns him inside out."

"Wael, I sweow!"

"Fact. That's a blamed hard hole, but I guess you an' me kin come out right side up."

"But s'posin' they s'pishun. They might pizen our vittals."

"They mustn't s'pishun. Ef yer thinks they will yer better send yer keyard right in ter Bulger, an' kick fur a job at ther Smallhopes. An' by ther way, ett ain't sure but what yer hed better do that last aryhow. They're layin' off ther hands, I hear, an' we could be layin' 'round waitin' fur 'em ter strike up ag'in."

"Wael, I guess jest better not. What's tew hinder takin' right holt tew wunst an' runnin' our man deown?"

Pete gave no immediate answer, but hunched his partner with the point of his elbow with the same playful hardness he had already several times employed.

A young man passed them. Though he was going leisurly, they were going slower still. Pete recognized him in the momentary glimpse of his face.

"Ett's ther tenderfoot what ketched ther gal up yander. Somehow I kinder think he's wuth ther watchin'. S'pose we follers?"

They struck in on the trail, keeping easily in sight, and drawing near as he halted in front of a building which bore the sign "Latter End Saloon."

As he hesitated a man slipped to his side, though without any appearance of stealth.

He was a magnificent specimen of physical development, and his clothing

set off his frame to the best advantage. A few words seemed to pass, and first one and then the other entered.

"By ther Jupiter jingoes, we must keep them men in sight," exclaimed Pete, in a magnified whisper. "Mebbe I'm right, an' mebbe I'm wrong, but for rocks I say ett. What's ter hinder thet sporty look-in' cove frum bein' Capt'n Diamund hisself?"

"Then, watch t'other chap, an' ett'll bring yew right on tew him."

"Holy smoke! What a chance! We'll watch 'em both."

CHAPTER VI.

THOMAS GETS A GUN.

Tom Gregory gave Faro Fantine about all there was to tell of himself; and what he didn't tell her it was easy for such a well versed young lady to guess at.

He was young; he had not been in the mining regions long, and before that he had lived in the country. At present he was working for wages in the Smallhopes Mine, which was located several miles from Right Bower, and owned and controlled by Major Munson.

He had a day off, and for good and sufficient reasons was on his way to the town, when he hapened to be on hand to rescue the lady who generally manipulated the deck from behind the faro table at the Latter End Saloon, a place much frequented by the lively sports of the town; and which was not much like the Garden of Eden before the fall.

It was not often the young man made his appearance in the town, and up to date he had never entered any of the saloons; yet he had recognized the queen of the Latter End, even before, by the merest chance, she had thrown herself into his arms.

Once he had seen her on the street, and, though acknowledging her beauty, had felt very much inclined to pass by on the other side.

As he went away from the spot where he had left the two standing he could not help but smile grimly to himself to think how in a moment all that had been changed.

Just a careless word or two and the clasp of a soft hand had made him—well, he knew not what, except that he had embroiled himself with Paul Wayland; and if that did not write him down a consummate fool he could suggest nothing surer. He knew the evil repute of the man only too well; but in the exhilaration of the moment did not care for that at all. How it might be when he had time to think the matter over was a different thing.

Wayland was slow to anger, and up to date had always seemed to have the right on his side; but in such quarrels as seemed to be thrust upon him he always killed.

Remembering a certain look in the face of the gambler, Thomas felt that in Wayland's mind he was most probably marked for a victim, and the thought sent something like a thrill through him, though, if he had it all to do over again, there was nothing that would have happened differently.

"All right," he said to himself, with a shrug of the shoulders; "the quarrel was none of my seeking; but if it goes on I will have to see that I have the ending of it. I suppose I had better get what the people out here call a gun. Before we get through with this thing I may have need of it. Lucky we were paid off this morning."

A gun was not a hard thing to find in Right Bower; and, as he kept of the same opinion in the matter, he had not been long in the town before he became the owner of a serviceable tool, and had been instructed in the way of managing it.

Then, he went about his other purchases, and was fortunate enough to have a chance to send them to the shanty he occupied near the mine by one of the foremen, who was going out on a buck-board wagon.

He could have gone himself, but for

some reason which he could hardly have explained, he preferred to linger in the town.

He was aware that Miss Fantine reached the hotel at which she boarded, and that she did not seem any the worse for wear. Perhaps that was the reason why he drifted into the dining room along with the rest and took the first meal in company with the world of Right Bower since going to work at the Smallhopes.

By this side sat a gentleman who had come in on the stage, and who was evidently a stranger to every one.

Young Gregory noticed he looked over the table with something like anxiety, but it was some time before he addressed him; and then it was in rather a guarded tone.

"Young man, are you a resident of this place?" he asked, bending toward Thomas.

"Scarcely of the place, though I work in a mine a couple of miles out, and get in once in a while."

"You are busy, then. I am almost sorry to hear it. I like your face, and, were you at leisure, I might try to induce you to assist me in what may be a matter of a few days; or it may take weeks. I may be able to end my quest here; it may take me across the continent. Are you open to engagement?"

That morning Gregory would have been only too willing to listen. Now things were different.

His answer was a distinct negative. "I am sorry. Perhaps I could have your help while I remain here. I am searching for a missing girl, and the trail, such as it was, pointed in this direction."

"I could hardly help you much, anyway. I know little about the people here. If she comes it ought not to be hard to find her."

"So it would seem. But she may come in a disguise that would puzzle Old Nick himself to see through."

"If you will excuse the question, what does she come here for, and will she be alone?"

"I think I understand your hint; but you are mistaken. It is no ordinary case of elopement. The lady has strong reasons for her action, and if she should succeed in her self-appointed mission would probably return to her friends. What we are afraid of is that she may be caught in some pitfall, and perhaps held for ransom. She could command a fortune if it was necessary, and Heaven help her if some of the villains get hold of the fact. You look like the timber out of which knights errant are made; and if you should happen upon her let me beg of you to furnish any assistance possible while communicating with her friends. You will be well rewarded."

Young Gregory smiled.

"You can be sure I will always be ready to assist an unprotected female; but it is not likely I will have the opportunity to assist this young lady. Why, you have not even told me your own name, much less hers. And I do not understand why this appeal to me has been made."

"Hush! It was a mistake introducing the subject here. I will see you by-and-by, when a full explanation will be made. My own name is Parsons—Roger Parsons. Pay no attention to me; I think I had better withdraw."

The stranger got up when he had said this and almost hastily left the room. A little later Thomas finished his supper and followed suit. Almost the first person he ran against was Paul Wayland.

"Who is your friend, young man?" was his question, given with an unpleasant sternness.

"Ask him. He can tell you better than I can."

"Don't get huffy, little man. I have just been making up my mind I ought to apologize a trifle for being rough, up there on the hill. The fact is, I was upset a trifle by the trouble of Miss Fan, and at the time would just as soon have

taken it out of you. With a gent of your calibre I can afford to apologize, though, for your own good, I would advise it don't go any farther."

"That's enough. You have done all the lady told you to, and we start square again. After this it will be as well to keep her name out of the conversation."

The young man was aggressive in his tone; more so, perhaps, than he meant.

He was not used to this sort of work; and there were not many men in Right Bower who would have cared to talk to the sport after the fashion he did just then.

Poker Paul only smiled, showing a row of white, sharp, regular teeth.

Then he bowed, at the same time touching his hat gracefully, and turned away.

"What the deuce do I want to be having a row with Poker Paul for?" muttered Gregory to himself.

"There wasn't any reason why I couldn't have answered him decently. He didn't put on any style, and that hint he gave me was only for my own good. For a boy of my gait I have picked out an elegant gang to run up against. If I had an atom of sense I'd go out to the Smallhopes right away—and stay there. I'm not the sort to be tramping 'round this town, nodding to Faro Fan, and bracing up for a racket with Poker Paul. If I stay here long the public will know if I have any brains—whether I do or not. I believe I will skip."

A very sensible conclusion; but Thomas remained, nevertheless.

He had no friends with whom he could while away the time and was shy of trying to make any. When it grew dark he made up his mind he would not go back to the mine that night; and some time later he halted in front of the Latter End, whither his feet seemed unconsciously to have borne him.

Over the door there flared a big red light, while a strange medley of sounds rolled out to his ears. He hesitated for but a moment, and then was about to set his foot on the step when a hand touched him on the shoulder. "I don't want to throw away good advice; but, if you will take my word for it, Hayseed, you'll keep out. You are not exactly the man for the occasion, and it's a tough gang holds out here."

The speaker was a fine-looking man, who had sport written all over him. What he meant by such a warning was a question Gregory in his then frame of mind did not stop to consider.

"Thank you for nothing; and perhaps you had better stay out yourself," he snarled; and then deliberately pushed on through the open door.

CHAPTER VII.

A BRACE DEAL AT THE LATTER END.

In spite of the reckless mood which was on him, Gregory halted when he got fairly inside.

For a stranger, and a possible victim, that was the best thing he could do until he got the bearings of the place, about which he as yet knew absolutely nothing.

Right Bower was on the boom, and the swing of affairs at the Latter End was enough to show it without asking any questions or going farther.

At one end was the bar, before which was a densely packed mass of human beings; at the other there was a small raised platform, on which several musicians were grinding out popular tunes with the assistance of a violin, a bass viol and a flute.

Along the wall were several tables, occupied by little poker parties, while through an open door one could get a glimpse of an adjoining room, apparently well filled by the more serious devotees of fortune and their observers.

Just how his presence there would be taken Gregory was not so certain; but he had come in to look around and intended to do it. Once having fairly studied out the lay of the land, he edged his way through the crowd without ap-

pearing to attract much attention, if any, and finally reached the other room.

It was something of a disappointment to see the dealer's chair behind the faro table occupied by a man, and that Miss Fantine was nowhere visible.

He had not admitted it to himself, but the fact was he had doubtless made his way hither with the idea of catching a glimpse of her at her avocations.

Perhaps that made his course easier. He edged his way a little farther, until he found a place alongside the table.

He had never wagered a cent on a game of chance in his life, but just now the inclination was strong within him, and he was not in the frame of mind to resist. He watched the game through the deal, which had just begun, and by the time it ended had picked up something of the theory. He threw down ten dollars to start him in chips, and commenced a little game of his own, which was trifling in its results for the time being, but exasperatingly successful. Luck was with him right along, and there was more than one of the bettors there who, after he had attracted attention, thought that if he only knew what to do with his luck he could break the bank before the second deal was out.

If he was not inclined to crowd the bank, there were others who were.

They had started in with a little game of their own and had lost steadily. They scented the greenhorn at the first play, and after watching him a trifle quietly made an experiment or two, which confirmed the idea which had simultaneously struck them.

After that they simply followed his lead, after the third or fourth bet doubling every time, along the running limit, which reached from fifty up to two hundred and fifty.

With a run of hog luck, a great deal of money can be got away with for the bank in that way in a short time; and at the worst a man don't lose so very fast if he is cold-blooded and only has the regular two per cent. against him.

A regular gambler would have seen how the thing was working before long, and would perhaps have entered a decided kick. Tom Gregory took the lead without question, never doubting but that it was just a coincidence and a regular thing. The dealer, a cold and unemotional man of thirty, known as Billy, among his cronies, and Mr. Burk among the outsiders, said nothing and kept on dealing.

William had met with various similar cases in his dozen years of experience, and recognized the fact that the young stranger had a streak that, if developed, would probably run his shoestring up into a veritable cable-tow.

If the young man had been the only one working the lead he would probably have been satisfied to keep on until the vein petered out of its own good pleasure. With such betting as the youngster did he would not break the bank very soon, and would be all ready, cocked and primed for a struggle when the luck was just the other way.

But it was a different thing when the little combination was formed to press the game on the greenhorn's lead, and it looked like a good time to stop it when they called the turn and doubled the limit.

A snarling curse fell from the lips of the sport, who led the combination as he saw the cards take the reverse order from that in which they were called; for the prospect of four to one had led them along after the modest bet of a few dollars which Gregory had made.

The sound, low though it was, reached Billy's ears, and he looked across the table with a sneer on his lips and a cold glitter in his eye.

Whether any words would have passed between the two cannot be told. At that instant Gregory, suddenly leaning forward, drove the blade of his jackknife through and through one of the little piles of cards.

"Excuse me," he said, coolly.

"I don't know much about faro, and if I've made a mistake I'm willing to pay damages; but, unless my eyesight is considerably wrong, there are twenty-seven cards in that pile."

And Gregory smiled over at the dealer, as though he had been paying him a delicate compliment.

The shock of an earthquake or the roar of a cyclone could hardly have had a more startling effect; and Billy Burk was the most astonished of all. To think this innocent young greenhorn had seen something which had escaped the lynx eyes of the professionals who had been betting on his luck! Was he a greenhorn after all?

All this went through the mind of the dealer like a flash, and his hand flew to his belt, while he set his burning eyes on the smiling face on the other side of the table. In another second he would have had the stranger covered.

His hand touched the pistol at his belt; but then it ceased to move.

First, there was a sharp click; and the sound was one he was only too familiar with. Some one already had his gun out, and the hammer back.

Then, that some one spoke in a cool but jeering tone.

"No, no, Billy, I really wouldn't. The boy is here waiting, and there is no danger he will get away; but the rest of us have a little interest in this affair, and, if you want to keep us in a good humor, I want to give you a bit of advice: Count the cards. After that, you can go as you please, and we'll know how to string our chips."

The speaker was the same man who had advised Gregory to keep out, when halting at the door of the saloon.

As he undoubtedly held the drop, the dealer was the more easily convinced he was uttering words of wisdom.

"All right; let some straight man run the bunch over. That will square me with the house; and after that I'll square myself with this young man."

As he spoke, Poker Paul came gliding forward.

"I guess we all know what kind of a game Billy pulls; but if you say the word I'll run them off and show you how they count."

"On your life you won't!" exclaimed the stranger who had interfered.

"Nobody says you ain't a square man, if it comes to that; but we might not be able to understand your arithmetic. There's Pat Doolin, now; he's not brilliant, but he gets there straight every time, without any frills or furbelows. Has anybody any objection to his running them over?"

"Is it your chip?" asked Poker Paul, tersely, his eyes seeming to shoot a glint of fire across the space which separated them.

"Mine it is, unless you prefer to hand Billy over to the tender mercies of the boy."

The ironical words came near to raising a little note of laughter.

They hit the truth so exactly they almost carried the house with the man whom Wayland had called Steelgrip.

"What's the objection to Pat?" added the latter.

"None at all, if he is willing to mix in the muck."

"An' whoy wouldn't Oi?" asked Pat, coming forward.

"Sure, an' it's a daycint sort av a gossoon he sames to be, an' it wor a pity to sind him over the range widout his bein' sure av whoy he wint. Give me the deck."

A sturdy little Irishman the speaker was, known to be honest as the day was long, and no gambler by trade, though he sometimes scattered or gathered in a few chips at the Latter End.

He stepped up to the table and carefully withdrew the knife from the packet of cards; then gathered up the latter.

Without looking at them he ran thumb and forefinger along the edges, counting swiftly but imperceptibly. A moment later he turned to the dealer.

"Sure, Billy," he said sternly, "there's twenty-sivin av thim; explain it av ye kin."

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY BURK'S BLUFF.

Billy Burk was aware that he was in a tight place just then, in spite of the apparent willingness of Poker Paul to back his hand.

The worst feature of the thing was that there were three men he had to watch particularly—and the three were strung out so that he could not take them all in at once.

If he tried to drop one the other two would be sure to get in their work.

And then, there was an ugly element, which just now was saying nothing, but which might come to the front with a rush before many minutes. The gamblers who had been following the lead of Gregory and who had lost on the turn could be depended on to be heard from before the game was over.

If they could see a way to getting their money without trouble, no doubt they would be satisfied. If not, they would come in with the crowd.

No sign of trouble showed in his face, which had assumed its stereotyped, professional smile.

He carelessly lolled back in his chair, and met the look of Pat Doolin without flinching.

"Looks like a mistake of some kind, Pat. Reckon if you counted the other pile you'd find only twenty-five."

"An' wan in the box, Billy. Looks like a fifty-three deck. Shall we count the rist—or have yez got your baggage packed, ready for the next boat?"

"The stage don't go out till to-morrow morning, and the walking's not fine. I may as well stay, and wait for the committee."

Billy's arms were folded, and, as he executed this bluff, his smile was more pronounced than ever. In fact, as the lips lifted at the corners of his mouth, it looked like a snarl; and, folded though his arms were, his hands were not far from the butts of his revolvers.

"Looks like a pity to put the committee to all the trouble you want to give it," put in Steelgrip.

"You are a pretty good fellow, Billy, and it wouldn't be even a little bit of fun to see you trying to climb a tree. You know how it is when the boys get started. Take an older man's advice, and try the walking, at least as far as Walnut Bar. You can wait there for the stage."

"Oh, say! Maybe that tenderfoot wants a shot at me?"

"That tenderfoot is out of the ring altogether. You understood we are acting as much for your good as for that of Right Bower."

"All right. Pete, you look out for the coin till the madam comes. Good-night, all. I'm going to take a walk for my health. When I come back I'm not sure it is going to be good for that of Steelgrip and the kid. So long, till I see you later."

As unconcerned as though he was not in the danger of his life, Billy arose and strolled carelessly toward the rear door, the crowd making a way for him without a word.

It looked as though the dealer was going to leave without further trouble.

But when the door was open he wheeled on the threshold, threw up his hand like lightning, took a snap shot at Steelgrip, and then darted out into the darkness.

Swiftly as the movement had been made, and accurate as Billy's aim was under all circumstances, his lead failed to speed true. Carelessly as Steelgrip had watched his departure, he was not taken by surprise, and, by giving a swift half wheel and a bend, he had gracefully writhed his body out of line.

The bullet spattered against the wall in his rear, doing no further damage.

Lucky it was for Billy Burk that it so

happened. If that bullet had touched a man there would have been a rush for blood. As it was, to check the crowd was no easy task, and scarcely any one other than Steelgrip could have done it.

Poker Paul might, perhaps; but he had not shown any interest in the affair after his services had been refused. It was not his policy to defend too openly a game which was not square down to the bottom; and there was but little doubt that Billy had sprung the cards.

The sport who had taken a hand in did not let go, however, and the crowd listened to him as, in a few crisp sentences, he told them to hold on. After all, he was the man at whom the shot was fired; and, as no one could say he was behind on the deal if the bank paid on the last turn, or even called it a stand-off, there was no pursuit.

Of course, there was a good deal of excitement; and, in the midst of it all, Faro Fantine came gliding into the room.

Though, without a doubt, the report of the pistol had reached her ears, she was as cool as could be, and listened to the explanation of the man who had been keeping the cues without more than a question or two.

When she had heard all the looker-out had to tell she turned to the crowd.

"Gents all; it's hard on the Latter End. I guess you know that since I have been in behind the lay-out you have had a square deal and no advantages. While I hold the box you will always get it. I am afraid Bill was on his mettle to-night. At any rate, I can promise that it is his last appearance in this house. As for the money, you can let it go on the next deal, and I'll pull for it as it lies, limit or no limit, or you can draw your stakes. With an extra card in the box it might not be so easy to decide just how that turn ought to have gone, anyhow, or I might be able to offer you more. How is that, young man?"

She turned sharply to Gregory.

"Couldn't be fairer, miss. Let it go as it lies; and, win or lose, I'll pull out."

What he had on the board was not much to win or lose; and he cared little which way it went; but the men who had followed his lead were disposed to grumble. Reddy Lewis was even disposed to push his claims to a good share of the stakes.

Miss Fantine watched him curiously; but Steelgrip promptly spoke up.

"Take it easy, Reddy. You've got your choice and your chances, and if the boy don't grumble you oughtn't to kick."

"If you say so, Steelgrip, let it go at that; but it's blamed hard lines on us, and we playing right along for a month, with never a streak against the bank till this."

"So much the better for the bank. I've run against that same luck myself several times; but you haven't heard me squeal."

"Ner us, either, 'cause we knowed we had a fair deal. But this time!"

"Oh, simmer or shoot," said the queen, turning sharply on Reddy.

"Make your game, gentlemen. I am going to deal."

A murmur ran around the table, showing how great a backing the fair dealer had, outside of the influence of Steelgrip. In the face of that, not another word of protest was made, but in silence the game went on.

When he saw his checks swept away by an adverse turn of the cards Gregory said nothing, but simply bowed and turned away. He had drifted into the game, had played on velvet, and was willing to drift out about even. He cashed in the remaining checks and edged his way toward the door.

The gambling table had no fascination for him, nor did he care to indulge in the dissipations of the bar. If he had been willing to admit the truth, the chance of seeing Fantine, of perhaps speaking with her, was all that had drawn him thither.

He had spoken with her, and now he

was willing to go. That he had made an enemy of Billy Burk and scarcely endeared himself further to Paul Wayland gave him little if any trouble, though a man like Steelgrip could have told him his chances for long life had hardly been increased by his whirl at the faro table.

He went out into the night alone, and no one seemed to notice his going. If he had been in his cabin out at the mines by this time he would have been in bed and snoring; but here he felt little like it, and did not turn his steps towards the hotel.

He did not know that he wanted to think; but he wandered away where thinking might most easily be done. He strolled along through the farther side of Right Bower in an aimless way; and then the idea struck him that he might as well have walked out to the Smallhopes if it was exercise that he wanted.

Finally he halted.

The spot was lonely. The town lay in his rear; but off at some little distance, on rising ground, he saw a light twinkling in what he knew was the residence of Major Munson.

He had never been there; he had no particular interest in the building or its occupants; but once attracted he continued to watch that light, though thinking of something else.

Then, on the night air, he heard the scream of a woman, seemingly in agony, and he rushed forward, directly toward the light.

CHAPTER IX.

AN AWFUL ERROR.

If the cry had come from a hut in the town Gregory might have hesitated. He was not altogether a fool in such matters, and knew that single-handed he might stumble across his death.

But Major Munson was his employer; and the cry of a woman raised at or near his home could not be that of some desperate outcast.

With a momentary thankfulness that he had been wise enough to provide himself with a pistol, he felt for the revolver to make sure it was ready for his grasp, and then dashed on.

The cry was not repeated; beyond, all was silence. He caught himself wondering what had happened, or whether his intrusion would be welcome. Had it not been for what he considered loyalty to his employer, he would have turned and gone back.

As it was, he finally halted and peered anxiously at the house, which was now not far away.

While he hesitated, in a listening attitude, he suddenly received a terrific blow on the head, which sent him sprawling to the ground.

He did not lose consciousness entirely, and immediately afterward could hear the sound of footsteps, dashing away from the spot, though they came to him strangely, and like to sounds in a dream.

He was now more certain than ever that something was wrong at the house, and when he staggered to his feet he stumbled on with all the haste he could master.

As he came up he saw the front door was wide open, and out through the opening streamed a wide bar of light.

On the threshold he paused a moment and looked in.

A terrible sight met his eyes.

In a heap on his own hearthstone lay a crumpled mass of humanity which Gregory knew was the master of the house.

From almost above him shone down the light of the lamp, and it fell upon a ghastly pool that reflected back darkly crimson.

There was no motion there, save in the limits of the spreading stain, and not even a gasp gave token there was any remaining life.

A little to one side lay another heap, but about that something was wanting which was present in the other. In spite of the huddled attitude and utter motion-

lessness of the body, the suggestion of death was absent. More than that, it was the figure of a woman.

Stranger though he was to the family, Gregory knew at once that it was Ida Munson, the niece of the owner of the Smallhopes. He had heard of her, even seen her once or twice, though never taking more than a passing glance.

What was the meaning of all this? Was the young lady senseless through injury or fright? What terrible deed had been wrought or catastrophe happened?

He looked around for the author of it, even before he stepped into the room; but there was no sign of any one else to be seen.

Then he remembered the blow which had stricken him down. Doubtless the assassin had met him as he was hurrying to the house.

All this went through his mind in that moment of hesitation on the threshold, and then he pushed forward. A touch on Major Munson's cheek, another over his heart, told him beyond a doubt that he was dead, and he turned to the young lady.

First, he placed her in a more comfortable position; then he looked around and found water.

Gently he sprinkled her face, and before long saw signs of returning color, and there was a feeble gasp.

Seeing she was safe to soon revive, naturally the young man began to think what would be next on the carpet.

It was too late to think of easily overtaking the villain or villains who had done the deed, and the best thing for him to do seemed to be to remain with the young lady until she had fully recovered, and then be guided by her directions.

It was true, she might not be in condition to offer much advice, but it would have been the height of brutality to have gone away and left her alone with the corpse.

In fact, it did not seem altogether right that her eyes should rest upon that body the first thing when they opened again. He glanced about hurriedly, and seeing there was no way of concealing the sight in the room, he stooped, placed his arms gently around the young lady, and raised her from where she was lying.

Then occurred two things, either of which, by itself, might not have been so important, but which, taken together, bid fair to work young Gregory more evil than he at once suspected.

Consciousness seemed suddenly to return to Ida Munson, and she gave a wild scream, each as he had once before heard that night; and throwing up her hands wildly, to brace them against his face, she struggled to thrust him back and writhe out of his arms.

"Murderer, murderer!" she exclaimed.

"Help! Help! Unhand me!"

And as she thus shouted, several men sprung into the room.

Perhaps it was as well that Miss Munson was still in his arms. These men were armed, and they would a great deal sooner have shot than gone to the trouble of taking him prisoner. The danger to the lady was all that held them back.

As it was, pistols came out, he heard the hammers thrust back, and the stern voice of one of the men:

"Drop that, ye cussed villain; an' han's up. We got yer foul."

The sounds operated on him like a galvanic shock. He started back, and Miss Munson slipped from his arms.

Indeed, he had no thought of detaining her. It seemed to him that but a few seconds had elapsed from the time she had shown a sign of reviving until she was away from him, staring at him from where she cowered against the wall, whilst upon him, with deadly aim, were trained the pistols of the new arrivals.

His hands went up, of course.

As yet, he did not realize his own danger, but he knew that with the drop

on him, it must be obey orders or fight a way out.

"Be cool, gentlemen, be cool. You are mistaken in the man," he said steadily, as he elevated his hands.

"Not much. We got him red-handed this time; an' I guess I better shoot an' be done with it. Look after ther leddy, Chet, I'll keep ther cuss kivered."

As they had seen nothing of what had been going on, it was no wonder Ida seemed to need attention.

She had reeled away from the grasp of Gregory. Now she covered her face with her hands, and giving vent to low moans, slowly sank down in the farther corner of the room.

Chet Brayson had a cabin half a mile farther on, and had been known to the major's family by sight. He was of a rough and ready sort in manner and appearance, but as a man his reputation was as good as the average.

He stepped forward and came to the side of the young lady.

"Thar's no use ter try ter soften et up, Miss Munson. Et seems ter hev bin a mighty rough deal, but we'll do ther best we kin fur ye. Whar's ther rest ov ther folks?"

"Gone. Over at Rawlings'. Has—has he—killed uncle?"

"Never mind that now. Don't think about it. Go into the next room. Stebbins will watch out for you, I'll do what I can for the major, and Pete will go get help. We got him, anyhow; and it'll make you feel better to know that he'll shorely climb a tree."

"The villain! He would have slain me too if you had not come. Oh, take him away, and let me go to uncle!"

By what seemed the most desperate of efforts she gathered strength and courage enough to stagger toward the corpse, which still lay as Gregory had found it, though Pete Porter was bending over it, looking curiously down.

Instead of shocking her still farther, the awful sight seemed to give her strength.

Both hands were raised high above her head, her eyes glared, she drew herself to the fullest height.

"Murdered, murdered!" she hissed. "I call you all to bear witness that he was murdered, and that I swear to avenge him!"

"Right you are, miss, an' murder it was; but ett won't take long ter even ett up ez fur ez sich things kin be done."

She looked at Pete with a wild glare in her eyes. To him it seemed she was about to go mad.

"That's all right; that's all right, miss. In course we got ter call in ther boys when sich a thing is ter be did; but we got him right hyer, an' thar's a tree out yonder thet you kin see him climbin' whenever you say ther word. We ketchen him red-handed, so ter speak, an' I don't reckon Right Bower'll want ter wait tell mornin'."

"Now, now!" cried the girl, evidently beside herself. "It is my duty, and thus I avenge my murdered uncle."

She caught a blood-stained knife from the floor and sprung like a tiger at the prisoner.

CHAPTER X.

IN A TIGHT PLACE.

While this was hurriedly going on Tom Gregory stood like a statue.

The miserable mistake had in the first place almost taken his breath away; and so outrageous did it seem that he was unprepared to face it with the seriousness the situation demanded.

He had taken into account the trying position of the young lady, who, after witnessing such a sight, had fallen into a swoon, and on recovering had taken him for the assassin; but he had supposed that when her wits returned she would see her error and acknowledge it.

Instead, she seemed more convinced than ever; and it was natural for these men to believe her.

Yet, as the surest way to quiet her nerves, he had kept silent, hoping that

of her own accord she would take back her charge, or, at least, examine farther, and call upon him for his story:

The sudden attack found him all unprepared. With his hands above his head, and a pistol trained upon him, ready to send a bullet crashing through his brain at a single aggressive movement, it seemed for the moment as though he was doomed.

And so, no doubt, he would have been had it not been for Brayson.

The man was perhaps as savage as any of them in his thoughts, but he had respect for Right Bower; and knew this thing ought not to be done in a corner.

Without a particle of doubt as to the guilt of the accused, he had a clear idea the forms of the law should be observed, if that law was only lynch law.

And then, it was no woman's work to slaughter a man, even though he had killed her nearest and dearest relative.

Just in time he threw up his hand to let the wrist of Ida drop into it.

"Stiddy, miss," he said, urging her back with gentle force.

"I ain't blamin' yer fur so feelin', but ett won't do."

"Let me go, I say. Didn't the villain kill poor uncle? Didn't he have his loathsome arms around me?"

"Thar, thar. We got him, sure enough, an' we'll keep him tell ther men ov Right Bower puts a loop in a string, an' sends him down ther redhot stairs. But that ain't woman's work."

"So that it is done, what matter whose hand does it? Why wait? Are you men, that you stand there thus?"

"Be easy. Thar's more help a comin', an' half ther town'll be hyer soon ez Pete spreads ther news. Git a move on, Pete. We kin run this thing, but we needn't be hogs. There'll be fun ernough ter spread all 'round."

Quickly, though with reluctance in his heart, Pete left the room.

As Ida staggered back, overcome if not convinced, though her fury appeared to be dying out before the calm words of the miner, Brayson turned to the prisoner.

"Now, young man, thar ain't much good you kin do yerself by talkin', but ef you've a mind ter tell ther truth yer might say who yer be, an' what devil put this in yer head?"

"It is easy enough to say who I am, but to explain what is the meaning of this charge, except on the ground the lady has been sent clean crazy by the terrible event, is more than I can do."

"Drop that. We seen a leetle ov ett ourselves, an' she's givin' ther straight goods. Who be ye?"

"My name is Gregory, and I work out at the Smallhopes. I heard the lady give a scream, and came to see what was the matter. I found the colonel dead, and his niece in a swoon. While I was trying to carry her to the next room, so as to save her the shock of seeing her uncle, she revived and mistook me for the murderer, who had made his escape before I reached the place."

The young man spoke as coolly as he possibly could, for he began to recognize more and more that he was in deadly danger.

If Miss Ida did not retract her accusation it would be apt to go cruelly hard with him when Right Bower came, with a whoop and a surge.

Brayson smiled, but it was not a reassuring smile. It was more like the snarl of a hungry wolf looking over its prey.

"Reckon you're one ov ther hands ez war laid off ter-day."

"Unfortunately I was, or I never would have been here."

"Jest it. An' bein' ez you war out a job up thar you thought you'd make one hyer."

"But you are mistaken. We laid off for a clean-up, but will go to work tomorrow, as usual. I had nothing against Munson; and my being here was the merest chance in the world."

"A blamed onlucky one fur you, an'

that story ov yourn are makin' it wuss, right along."

"But it's the truth."

"Fur ez ett goes, but yer don't seem ter know thet we knows, an' all Right Bower, thet ther Smallhopes hez shut down all 'round. Fur why? Ther lead hez petered, an' thar won't be a lick of work done thar fur a month. That's ther chance, ez yer calls ett, brung yer 'round hyer, ter play ter git even, 'cordin' ter your sabbe."

Brayson's statement, if it was true, added another complication to his environment.

It had happened before that a discharged workman had taken his late employer's life; and the idea of revenge might supply the motive for this crime, that was laid at his door.

It was time to go slow.

"You have made up your mind to my guilt, and while the blood is up all around there is little use in my trying to clear myself. I don't blame you; and I am sure, as soon as Miss Ida gets her wits really back she will clear me."

"Pears like you hev her name mighty pat ter be sich a stranger ez yer wants ter let on."

The ugly suspicion which had come into Brayson's mind was deepening. He began to think perhaps it was a trouble about the young lady which had brought this thing on.

Tom caught the suspicion on the fly, and a flush of anger swept over his face.

"Every one working at the mine knows the young lady, though I never spoke to her before in my life. That's all I have got to say. I'm not trying to run away, either. I'll show my innocence before all Right Bower."

"Reckon you're a blamed fool, ary way we take yer. Right Bower are a comin', now, an' you'll hev ther chance."

True enough, footsteps could be heard without, and soon the avant couriers of the crowd burst on the scene.

The story of Pete had lost no element of horror in his telling, and these men thought they knew the truth as it was, and wanted no farther explanation. The first man in was swinging a rope.

"Hyar we be! Out with him, an' hev him all ready ter swing up when ther crowd kims. Thar's no use wastin' time. Whar's ther duck thet's earned ther rope?"

"Stiddy, Blodgett! I'm runnin' this thing tell ther crowd kims. Ther young leddy hez put ett in my han's. We don't want no more excitement hyer than we kin help. Pore thing! She's 'most dead."

"Hello! By mighty ef it ain't."

Blodgett had halted, and was gazing curiously at the prisoner, whom he seemed to recognize.

"Ain't what? Speak out pard, ef yer recognizes him."

"In course I do. It are ther young galoot thet hed a streak on at the Latter End ter-night, an' ef he'd a knowed what ter do with it he could a busted ther bank wide open."

"Eh! How war that?"

"Oh, he sashayed inter ther game, hed a row with Billy Burk, an' would a bin cold meat ef Steelgrip Steve hedn't chipped. Then, Billy hed ter jump ther camp, 'long ov hevin' sprung ther keyards, an' tried a shot at Steve an' missed him. Then, ther hull thing simmered, Fan took ther box, and this feller kim away. He must a got in his work hyer mighty sharp."

More might have been said on this line but for the arrival of others, who came on the run, and were ready for blood. Brayson and Stebbins closed up around their prisoner, determined that he should not be harmed until the town had taken the chance to sit in judgment, and the hullabaloo prevented any more connected conversation in regard to him. In ten minutes there were a hundred or more men on the ground, ranged in a circle near a tree; Judge Lynch was seated on a table; and the prisoner was in the midst. With scant time for reflection the trial had begun.

"Now, miss, if you please, an' it ain't a breakin' ov you too much all up, will you tell ter this court an' jury what you knows about this hyer horrid affair?"

With burning eyes, and a face white as death, Ida Munson stepped forward.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVIDENCE ON THE FOREHEAD.

A hush fell on the crowd as the niece of the murdered man took her place to tell the story which all were anxious to hear.

Not many there had ever spoken to her, but all knew who she was and had seen her often enough.

In spite of her grand ways, she had been popular in Right Bower.

The few whom she had met on a friendly footing had been more or less fascinated; while others knew that the niece of the owner of the Smallhopes, and probably the richest man in the town, was socially away above them.

She began in a low tone.

The excitement under which she had labored when so wild to take personal vengeance on the unfortunate Gregory, had worn itself out, and she was suffering, apparently, from the reaction.

But she spoke none the less positively, never once appearing to want to shirk what seemed almost a religious duty, unpleasant though it might be.

She began by explaining that she and her uncle had been alone in the house, the woman who looked after the cooking and heavy work having gone to visit a Mrs. Rawlings, who lived in the town proper, and was a relative.

She was in her bedroom, about to prepare to retire, and the major was reading by the light of the lamp which was still burning, when there was a knock at the door.

This caused her no uneasiness, as her uncle often had a late caller, but she hesitated in her preparations, and, though without any particular curiosity, stood listening.

The major went to the door, and she heard some indistinct words, and almost immediately the person without tried to force his way in.

At that she passed from her room, and opened the door leading into the sitting-room.

She saw the door fly open, and her uncle leap back toward the desk, in a drawer of which he kept a revolver.

The murderer sprung in so swiftly he was within reaching distance of the major at once, and her uncle struck out, a hard blow, which hit the man on the head, staggering him.

Again the major turned to his desk, but the assassin, recovering himself again, sprung forward, a knife in his hand, and struck savagely at the mine-owner, burying the blade in his breast.

The major fell at the stroke, and the fellow, dropping his knife, leaped at her, seizing her around the waist.

Then she screamed, fought him off as best she could; and in the midst of the struggle Brayson and the rest entered and took him prisoner.

That was the story, told with more and more excitement as it progressed. When it was finished, there was not a man there who doubted the guilt of the accused, and the only thing it seemed worth while to do was to get somewhat at the motive.

Judge Lynch had asked no questions, made no interruption, while this testimony was in progress, but now he turned as gently as he knew how.

"It's an awful story, miss, an' you got real sand ter stand up to yer duty, an' tell it. Ef you kin stand a leetle more we'd like ter ask ef you knowed ther young man, an' ef thar 'peared ter be ary quarrel betwixt him an' yer uncle?"

"To me he was a stranger, though I think I have seen his face before. It seems familiar. But uncle knew him, though he did not call his name. There may have been a little rough talking at the door, but after that everything was done in silence. I know nothing about

his reasons for the crime, and I doubt if uncle did."

"Yer says he works at the Small-hopes?"

"I think it is likely, though I am not sure."

"Did you hear anything about work being stopped there for the present?"

The answer to this was listened for eagerly. The report had got out in town at a late hour, and it needed confirmation.

"Yes, sir. I heard that they had lost the lead, and uncle had about decided to do nothing more out there for a month or so, until he could get an expert here to advise with him."

"That is all, miss. Your woman has got back, an' you better go 'long with her ter Missus Rawlings, er somewhere else. You won't want ter stay in ther house ter-night, an' we'll fix this leetle thing up while you're gone. Everything hyer'll be taken keer ov."

She hesitated as though loth to leave, and at that moment Gregory spoke up.

"I'd like to ask the witness a question or two."

A howl arose.

Had it not been that Judge Lynch sat with his revolvers in his hands, and did not intend the prerogatives of the court should be encroached on, the crowd would have rushed forward to perform the execution without waiting for the sentence to be pronounced.

Nevertheless, after a little, he managed to proceed, though it was plain he would have to be guarded. The people did not intend to allow much cross-questioning.

"Will you tell the court whether, when you saw your uncle fall, you did or did not faint away?"

"I did not faint, though I felt weak."

"Are you positive I am the man who leaped at your uncle through the open door?"

"You are; I know it. There is the mark of uncle's blow on your forehead, now. You cannot escape, for the hand of the dead has marked you."

She pointed as she spoke, and a man snatched up a lamp from the table and held it to Gregory's face, so that all might see the livid mark of a blow on his forehead.

The crowd gave one look, and then broke loose.

The yell that arose was enough to make the most iron-nerved of men think seriously of his latter end, and Gregory knew there was no longer a chance to clear himself before that crowd.

It had pronounced his guilt, and was declaring his doom.

In the front of the charging rank came a man with a rope.

Four yards away he gave a cast, and a noose coiled around the neck of the proposed victim. Another moment and willing hands would have had him swinging from the tree.

The idea of a diversion of even a temporary character never entered the head of the young man, who had braced himself for the inevitable ending.

Yet, a diversion was coming, though unnoticed by the crowd.

Not far away from the outskirts a steel-muscled man held the heads of two chafing horses pointed directly toward the crowd, whilst a second man brought down the lash of a heavy stock whip in one mighty swinging cut upon their haunches.

As the blow fell the other man let go his hold upon the bridles, and the horses dashed madly past him, straight for the heart of the crowd.

CHAPTER XII.

JUDGE LYNCH LOSES HIS GRIP.

The charge of those two horses accomplished more than a company of soldiers could have done. They gave a respite to Thomas Gregory.

Had a hundred United States troops put in an appearance and called a halt in the exercises the chances are half a dozen men would have taken a snap-shot at the prisoner before answer was made.

But this was a different thing. It happened there was a little opening in the dense throng, and into this the frightened and smarting animals thrust themselves so swiftly there was no general alarm until they were actually near the heart of the crowd.

Then, a sudden shout of fright from several men who had been overturned brought the attention of everybody in that direction, and, though the cause of the trouble was instantly understood, the panic which followed was not any the less real.

For a few moments there was a lively scene of trouble.

Those near the plunging steeds, now more frightened than ever, proceeded to try to get out of the way as expeditiously as possible, though one or two did make futile grasps at their heads.

One man who leaped, caromed against two who were standing still, and those who were for the present safe had to take a glance at those who were in more or less danger.

It was not exactly the situation for the use of firearms, and the sharp report of several pistols only tended to make confusion worse confounded, since the shots had been unavailing.

All this lasted for a few moments only, but there was an instant when not an eye was fixed upon the prisoner; when attention was again directed to the spot where he was supposed to be he was no longer there.

Even then, it took a minute or two to establish the belief that he had made his escape.

That such a thing could be possible was beyond belief, and the excitement over the intrusion of the horses had been so momentary there did not seem, in the minds of the men who first noted his absence, time enough to have moved from the spot. The first idea was that he had fainted.

Judge Lynch, who, in spite of his uncouth speech, was a man of hard-headed common sense and great practical resource, took in the situation rapidly, and spoke on the instant.

"Eyes open, all!" he shouted.

"His pards have stole him away. Them hosses war a trick ter git him off. He can't hev got fur. Scatter out an' hunt. Ef yer finds him don't run no chances. Ef yer can't bring him in alive, dead meat'll do jest ez well. Run him down!"

The awful yell which rose up when the crowd understood that their victim had at least temporarily made his escape was horrible to hear.

It was worse than the snarl of a thousand wolves.

"Git torches!"

"Thar's only one way the kin hev gone. He must hev slipped back to'ards ther trail."

"That's so. He couldn't git past the crowd. Stritch out a line, so he can't dodge past. We'll hev him!"

So they shouted. Some dashed away in immediate pursuit, whilst others waited until a more regular method could be employed. There were some who thought it possible to effect a recapture at once; but there were others shutting their teeth and swearing to run him down if it took a week.

But those who were lingering to form a more organized battalion were destined not to leave the ground quite so quickly as they had expected.

Above the hum and hubbub of the crowd began to rise a strange, crackling noise, and all at once a glare showed itself at their backs, which made every man face about with a new thrill.

"Fire! fire!" they shouted, and with a fresh instinct the most of them dashed toward the house, where the flames were beginning to dart out through opened doors and windows.

The mansion of Colonel Munson was in flames, and without much doubt was doomed.

No appliances were there to check the progress of the devouring element.

Then a thought suggested itself.

"Where is Miss Mason?" asked more than one.

"Who has seen her since the judge told her to go? Can she be in there?"

"An' ther Kunnel's body. Ett's jest too awful."

"Reckon both are done fur ef she went back ter take a look at him."

One or two of the more venturesome rushed up to the very threshold, but the attempt to storm the house was in vain.

The flames drove them back, and a second glance told the boldest that no man would be able to pass into that fiery furnace and live.

No soul could answer the question in regard to Miss Ida. She seemed to have melted away as mysteriously as the prisoner had done, and whether she had re-entered the house, as some suggested, or had gone to seek shelter somewhere else, were questions which might take time to solve.

As to the colonel, none doubted but that his residence in life was proving his funeral pyre in death.

Not a thing was saved from the doomed building; nor was a sound heard from within to indicate that a living being had been caught in what well might have been a death-trap.

As the man who had been acting as Judge Lynch had been elevated to that position by the votes of the assembly, he had a certain authority even now, and had no hesitation in using it.

When it was a certainty the building could not be saved, he made a demand for attention, and was successful in gathering around him at least a fraction of the late crowd.

Then he told off various men for different duties.

First of all, a search was to be made for Miss Ida and the domestic, who had perhaps born her company.

Others were detailed to remain on guard, and, if possible, discover something about the origin of the fire.

Others were to join in the pursuit of the escaped murderer, or try and find traces of how he had been helped away.

Though no one had seen him go, it appeared to be the general opinion that in some way he had received assistance.

One man in the party appeared to be left out; nor did the fact seem altogether pleasing to him.

"Say, jedge, ain't yer goin' ter swear me in ez a dep'ty. I'm jest a holy ole terror ter find things out, an' this hyer are a time when Right Bower expects every man ter do his duty."

"And who are you?" asked the judge.

He had seen the face, but it was altogether strange to him. He was even inclined to look at it with some little suspicion.

"Posy Pete, ef yer must know ett. Otherwise an' sometimes knowed ez ther Sunflower Sport. I jest arrived lately, but I tell yer I'm a good man ter tie to, an' yer don't want ter leave me out. It'd hurt my feelin's jest too offle ef I warn't 'lowed ter kerry my end ov ther heat an' burden."

"I ain't sure but what you're a kinder suspicious case, and it might be ez well fur you ter give an account ov yerself."

"I'm willin', but thar's mighty little ter tell. Me an' my pard war sinkin' a few chips at ther Latter End when ther news come. We jest sashayed out with ther rest of ther crowd, an' I bin hyer ever sence, waitin' ter take hold ov ther rope when ther time come."

"Reckon that story of his is about straight goods," interposed one of the citizens. "We all left the Latter End together, an' he's been pretty near my elbow ever sence. The rest of the boys can tell you the same thing."

"If you say so, I guess he is straight; but where is this pard of his that he speaks of; and what sort is he?"

"Oh, he bolted off with ther gang that took ther early boat, afore ther fire war diskivered. Coffin are his name, an' ef havin' long legs an' knowin' how ter use 'em does ary good, he'll ketch that young chap sure."

"If yer really want ter be up an' a doin', perhaps yer best layout would be ter try an' find how them hosses got inter ther crowd. Bein' a stranger, you'd hev a better show than most, an' that's ther real hub ov ther hull affair."

"Whose hosses be they? You men or ter know."

Half a dozen were ready to answer that question, and all spoke at once. The owners had been right up in the front rank of the crowd, and were above all suspicion.

There was no clue to the matter, for no one had been seen skirmishing in the neighborhood of the place where those horses had been tied, though, as every one was so much interested in the proceedings of the court, a dozen men might have been lurking around without attracting attention.

Pete listened to the eager explanations, and appeared nonplussed for the moment.

Then, he bent over and whispered:

"Jedge, I wants ter ax yer a question in private, an' I don't keer 'bout yer repeatin' ett. Are ye riddy?"

The judge leaned nearer, and listened with curiosity. Such a request seemed to have an interesting meaning behind it.

"I ain't none too well acquainted with names er faces, but ov them ez I picked up sence I bin in Right Bower I noticed thar war but one a-missin'."

"And who war that?"

"I'll tell yer, but I don't want ter start no whoop tell we know thar's suthin' in ett. So fur ett's jest a lidgea."

"Blast ye, ef ye hes one, split it out, an' don't be wastin' time. Looks mebbe ez though you was grindin' a axe ov some kind."

"Nary axe hev I ter hold, yer honor. But up to ther Latter End I see a sport they called Steelgrip, an' I jest wanted ter axe ye ef you knowed jest who he be, an' whar he are now. He ain't bin hyer."

The judge had begun to grin when he heard the name; but the closing words of the sentence sobered his face, though he answered without hesitation:

"Better keep that question ter yerself, fur Steve might kick ef he heard it; an' when he kicks it's mighty hard. An' the boys know he's square ez they make 'em."

"That's good enough; but you notiss he ain't hyer now."

"Reckon that's a easy one to answer. Him an' Poker Paul went inter the private room at ther Latter End, ter hev a leetle wrastle at draw. They's so busy I don't guess they heard ther news; an' ef it was right down centerest in they wouldn't a quit ef half ther town war a burnin'. That's their kind."

"Thankee, jedge. That 'splains ett; but I'll be mighty curious ter know how that game turned out. I won't keep yer longer, but ef yer dead sure I'm on ther level I'll git down ter work."

"Git thar. Ef yer don't act straight we'll hang yer in ther mornin'."

CHAPTER XIII.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

Gregory had braced himself for what he was sure was to come.

Though this wild life was something in which he had never shared to any great extent, he was not ignorant of the ways of a crowd when the leaven of blood had taken fair time to work in it. At that moment he believed his doom sealed.

He showed no signs of weakening, but with arms folded across his breast, waited as calmly as he could for death.

At that hopeless and apparently helpless moment the diversion came.

The crowd reeled to and fro, there was confusion and shouting, and suddenly he felt himself grasped from behind and drawn out of the press, whilst a stern voice whispered in his ear:

"Let yourself go without a word. It's your only chance. In another minute they will hang you."

Tom Gregory yielded, partly because in his dazed condition he could do nothing else; and partly because he had a glimmering idea that it was a friendly voice.

"Keep close to me," said his rescuer,

in the same sibilant tone, and the hand still continued to grasp firmly his collar.

So rapid were their motions that before the crowd had recognized the fact of Gregory's escape, the two had entered the house.

It seemed like a desperate thing, but if they met no one it was after all the safest plan that could have been adopted. Who would think of looking for them there?

"You understand, I am certain of your innocence?" said the man who had come to the rescue, as they were fairly hidden from outside view.

"To-morrow the butt end of those fools out there will feel the same way, but to-night there is no convincing them, and I don't care to fight the crowd. Killing a dozen innocent idiots to save another of the same kind is wasteful."

"Yew air right, boss," drawled a low, nasal voice, and a second man stepped within the room.

"I am a trustin' tew yew in this thing, but I sh'd kalkilate it wuz 'ime tew git a move on or we may have to dew that same slaughter for the sake ov savin' three ov 'em."

"Truth, every word of it. Follow me. I know more of the ins and outs of this house than anybody except the owner. This way."

Gregory was now as cool as need be, and in the man who had brought him hither he recognized the individual who had advised him not to go into the Latter End, and who subsequently appeared to take his part when the row with the dealer had commenced.

As for the other, Tom believed he had caught a glimpse of him in the saloon. Why the two had come to his rescue in the face of so much danger was more than he could understand, but there was no time for questions.

As they were turning away, they became aware of the fact that there were other occupants in the house besides themselves.

They heard the sound of footfalls in the adjoining room, and then were conscious something was taking place which they did not exactly understand.

In their position it was not well to investigate, though it hardly seemed probable they had been followed thither.

Steelgrip had caught up a lighted lamp, and with a motion for silence led the way. In a moment they had passed noiselessly to the cellar, closing a door behind them which seemed to shut with a spring, and which shut off every distinct sound from above.

"By heavens," he muttered; "I believe some one has fired the house. If any one got a glimpse of us going in here it may be bad for us if we are seen again."

He paused to listen, but the sounds from above and without came only in a faint, subdued roar, without sense or meaning.

Gregory listened as keenly as the rest, and at the same time, glancing around, took in the apparent danger of their position.

"If the house is burning what better off are we than before? You are giving your lives, and cannot save me. Better to have left me to the rope. We will be roasted alive when the roof falls in; while, if they extinguish the fire, they will find us here."

"Glad to see you are cool enough to count the chances," answered Steelgrip Steve, in a tone showing no particular alarm.

"We're all right up to the present time; but what I'm trying to make out is the why and wherefore of the conflagration."

"Are you sure there is one?"

"Dead sure, if I can trust my nose, which never failed me yet. If I had taken the chances and investigated on the spot I might have known a heap more, but I was afraid of losing you; and now it is too late."

"Perhaps it was an accident."

"Accident your grandmother! Such accidents don't happen without a reason for them. Looks to me as though the

party who had it in for the major had come back to finish up the job."

"Jewhilkens! Yew don't think they would take that reesk?"

"Risk, nothing. Since our young friend here was supposed to be guilty, no one not a friend of his would be suspected. Evidently, they mean to get Munson out of the way beyond a doubt. Not content with killing him outright they want to burn his body."

"Fur why?"

As the reader had no doubt guessed, the man with the drawl was Hezekiah Coffin, and by some strange chance he was following the lead of the man known as Steelgrip Steve, the Gold Sport.

He was more than a little interested in this thing, which he began to think might turn out to be fascinating, and perhaps more dangerous than the pursuit of Captain Diamond.

"That's the mystery of it, but I'll try if I can't block it out. Here! If anything happens to me, pull the door shut, and light out until you get somewhere."

He quietly pushed against a corner of a plank which formed part of the cellar wall, and it swung around, revealing a narrow door, with a passage beyond.

Gregory and his other newly-made friend passed through the opening, crouching in the narrow passage without a word.

They were too wise to attempt to argue with the man whose strong will was dominating them both, and who stole back so noiselessly they never heard him move.

They did not have long to wait.

In a few moments Steelgrip returned, and entering the passage closed the door behind him.

"The place is doomed," he said shortly; "but some one was ahead of me. The body was gone. Suppose they carried it away, but I had no chance to find out. Doors and windows open for a draft, a gallon of coal oil and a match get in their work mighty fast."

He said no more, but taking the lamp, led the way on through the passage, which was barely wide enough to allow their unimpeded progress in single file.

Once or twice the guide held the lamp down to the floor, which he scanned, though without making any discovery.

After what seemed a long journey they came to the other end of the passage.

As they came out into the night a bright glare showed the house was burning bravely; and they could hear the dull roar of flame and crowd combined, though tempered by distance.

"Now, then," said Steve, "we don't want to have a necktie party, and Coffin, you don't want to go into a box. You follow this gulch down till you strike the trail, and then work around toward the crowd, keeping both eyes open. Mix in soon as you can, till you have an alibi, and then draw off to town. I'll see you later and make it right. As to Gregory, here, he can't go alone, and I'll see what can be done for him."

Hezekiah asked for no farther explanations. Whatever was to be done had to be done at once, for at that moment they heard blundering footsteps approaching the spot.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNWELCOME APPROACH.

Tom Gregory caught Steelgrip by the arm.

"If you have any plan, arrange it quickly. I won't be taken alive. I can be as big a wolf as any of them."

At the same time he drew his revolver with the other hand, and cocked it.

"You fool, you. Leave the shooting to me. I'll know when it's time to get down to firearms. A shot now would ruin everything."

"Let us be moving, then. You don't know what it is to have such tigers on your trail."

"Don't I, just? Don't move a step till you hear from me again."

With this caution Steve glided away, directly toward the advancing strangers.

"Pears ter me I heard a sound," said

one of them in a coarse voice, which the sport did not recognize. "We's ther furd-est out, an' ef we ketch a glimp ov a man he's our meat, an' down he goes."

"Ett ain't jest bright enough fur fancy shootin', but ther boys seems ter hev a bully bonfire. Ef he's hidin' near by they're bound ter ketch him."

"Hold on! Blame ef I don't see him now."

Steelgrip had worked in on the flank, and turning, saw the fellow had made no mistake.

Gregory was crouching where he had left him, and though the glare from the fire made no great showing when not looking in that direction, it nevertheless cast a certain glow which served to render such an object as a crouching man faintly visible.

"Sorry for the outfit, but down they go," thought Steve, springing forward as a brace of pistols went swinging up.

He felt sure a single shout or shot would bring the crowd still lingering at the burning building in that direction; and with the full pack in pursuit escape would be doubtful.

It was too dark to be certain of time and distance, but luck stood him well.

No sound heralded his approach, and he swung out his right, straight as a die, landing on the jaw of the nearest of the two.

The blow landed where it was sent for, and the man went heels over head. As his companion halted, thoroughly dazed for the second, another blow came booming out, that was just as effective.

Then, the sport bounded on them and swiftly wrenching away their arms, satisfied himself that for the moment they were not likely to give trouble.

How soon they might give an alarm he did not know, and he could not go farther than he had gone to render it impossible.

More injury would be brutal, and it would take too much time to bind and gag them. The sport went back to Gregory, caught him by the hand, and started off in a rapid flight.

For half an hour or more the flight was kept up, though now and then their speed slackened for a few minutes.

After that the pace slackened a good deal, and finally they came to a lonely shanty, in a most desolate spot.

The cabin was built against the side of the mountain, and there were no signs of life about when Steve gave a rap at the door.

There was an instant response from within.

"Who's there?" shouted a voice, and at the same time there was a sound as if some one had suddenly sprung to the floor.

"Take it easy, Ante, it's Steve. Don't break your neck to get at us, we can wait."

There was no delay, however, but the door opened.

"When you come this time of night I guess it's safe to say you are in a hurry. Who you got with you now?"

"Blamed if I know exactly," answered Steve, with a short laugh, as he propelled Tom Gregory into the hut.

"It's a kid that was in a peck of trouble, and as he didn't seem able for the job I thought I would save him myself. I want to stow him away here until the fool mad hornets at the camp settle down a bit."

"What's he been doing?"

The proprietor of the shanty had lit a lamp, and now looked curiously at his unknown visitor.

"Playing the good Samaritan, of course, and a nice mess he made of it. They would have hung him off hand if I hadn't known there was some mistake about it, and, with a trifle of assistance from another idiot I picked up on the spot, just snatched him."

"You don't mean the camp rose at him?"

"You just better bet they did; and small blame to the camp, taking things the way they understood them. Now, I want to hear the story as he tells it, and

then get back, if I can. It's no fool's sort of a game that has been played to-night, and it is going to be a contract to get to the bottom of it."

"If it can be done you are the man for the occasion."

"I know it, Ante, but there might be such a thing as stumping even me. Now, my friend, let us hear the truth, clean down to bed rock if you want me to help you out of what may be a bigger snarl than you dream of even yet."

"See here. I've been trying to tell the truth, right along; and the more I did it the closer came the noose. I begin to think I'd better say nothing more about it, and just let nature take its course."

"There's where you'd be away off. You give it to me straight, and I'll back your game, whichever way the cat hops. If you killed the major, say so. If you didn't tell us what you know. Ante, here, is a dumb man, and I never talk. All I'm after is to beat the gang, and see you through; and I'll do both or my name is not Steelgrip Steve. When I take hold I never let go. See?"

"All right. Where do you want me to begin?"

"You might as well mention how you came to go into the Latter End, and what Poker Paul has in for you about. I tried to get it out of him, but he wouldn't whisper. Then tell us how you came to go up to the house, and what happened till I came on the carpet."

Briefly, but without missing a point, Gregory told his story, touching briefest of all on the aid he had given Fantine, and his idea in entering the saloon; but more fully when it came to his encounter with Ida Munson.

"Styx on wheels!" exclaimed the young fellow Steve had called Ante.

"Ain't that story just too lovely for any use. Why, they'll hang him sure, if it takes a year; and all wrath can't save him."

"Perhaps Steelgrip Steve can. What I'd like to have explained is, how the young lady came to make such a mistake, or—did she?"

Gregory started.

Such an idea had not entered his mind before.

"Why—how—what makes you ask such a question as that? If she was not in earnest she was surely the best actress I ever saw. She would have killed me with her own hands but for that man Brayson."

"Chet is all right. He's a square man. Lucky it was you fell into his hands first off. He would give you a fair show, and keep the rest down till Right Bower had a chance to talk. I'll have a hack at him, to get his story, if I can."

"And meantime, what am I to do?"

"Stay right here. If you try to get out of the district, they'll overhaul you. Your chance is to find the party who did the killing. Then, your story will fit in, and you can come back and shine up with Faro Fan, rejoicing."

"Excuse me, but will you please leave the name of the lady out. It might do her harm to have it mentioned alongside of mine."

"All correct, though there never was a person better able to take care of herself than that same little lady. Ante, here, will hide you away when he goes to work, and you just possess yourself with patience. Men nor angels could find you here. Be a good boy. Good-morning. I've got to work my way into town before they are dead sure I am out of it."

When he was gone Ante spoke:

"Now, your turn in and get some sleep. I can keep a look-out for the balance of the night, and I suspect you're dead tired."

The advice was palatable as it was sound, and as Gregory had a reasonably clean conscience, it was not long before he slept, never opening his eyes until broad daylight.

He found breakfast ready, and Ante bending over him with a smile on his face.

"Have to roust you out, partner. I must leave for the day, and want to see

you safe before I amble off. Chuck first, and we'll attend to the rest afterward."

When breakfast was over, Ante showed the young man the hiding place which made the cabin so sure a refuge. The back of the fire-place was in reality a rude door, which swung inward on a pivot, and beyond it was the entrance to a cave.

"I'll put a padlock on the outside door, and if you want to go outside you'll have to take the window for it. I wouldn't advise you to take the window, though; and if you want to sleep, better light the lantern, go into the cave, and take the hole in after you. You're young yet, and may be caught napping. There's some books to amuse you with; and don't you answer to the call of Steve himself, but get out of the way the first chirp you hear. He might bring a dozen men right here on the idea that if you couldn't keep out of the way you ought to be caught. And catching means hanging, and don't you forget it."

After this lengthy advice, Ante took his departure, and Tom Gregory was at last alone.

His thoughts were not cheerful, you may be sure, and he felt little like slumber or showing himself abroad, though from time to time he peeped out of the window.

Fortunate for him was it that he did so.

A little thrill of anxious surprise ran through from cheek to knee-pan as he saw a squad of men, perhaps half a dozen in number, approaching the cabin.

They came on in a way which showed they knew just where to find the spot they were aiming for.

He felt like waiting to be sure they would investigate the cabin, but there was the danger that something might fail to work in the haste of the last moment, and he withdrew to the passage, though he did not entirely close the door. A moment later the padlock was shattered by a pistol bullet, and he knew it was time to retire for good.

CHAPTER XV.

HEZEKIAH SHIFTS FOR HIMSELF.

As he was a thorough stranger to the ground, the position of Hezekiah Coffin, when turned adrift by Goldsport, was not the most comfortable in the world.

The gulch which he was to follow was none too well illuminated, and he knew how easy it would be for him to lose his way.

He had no idea where to look for the trail into which he was to turn, and thought it possible he might cross it in the darkness.

Then, too, there was the danger of blundering over some enthusiastic searcher, who might make him a great deal of trouble. He was by no means sure he could give a satisfactory account of himself, especially if he did not know what sort of a story Posy Pete was going to tell.

The two had separated in haste, and a slight divergence in their historical narrations might very well fit a noose to his own neck, even if they did not hang the Sunflower Sport on general principles.

If he had been certain which route to take with safety he would have been willing to say good-bye for good, and promise never to set foot again within the limits of Right Bower.

After a time he saw the light caused by the conflagration more plainly, and that brought up the second feature in the case, to give him more trouble than ever.

He might have been able to prove his innocence of any hand in the murder; but in the eyes of the camp arson was rather a worse crime; and if he was once charged with that he might as well give up all hope.

In fact, he was not so sure, thinking it over, that Steelgrip had not had a hand in that part of the evening's entertainment.

"Jewhilkens!" he muttered to himself; "it 'pears 'ev me for a detective I hev wrung myself in on the wrong side. Mebbe Posy wuz right, an' this Steelgrip is Capt'n Diamond, after all. Ef so—"

wael, I kalkerlate I hev made a p'int in the game, even if I hev sorter give myself away. What would Bulger say ef I sh'ld land ther ree-ward?"

Then it struck him that so far the advantage was largely with the other man. Steelgrip Steve possessed knowledge he could put to advantage in case anything was likely to happen to himself.

A hint to Right Bower of what Hezekiah had been engaged in that night might at any moment in the future make trouble for the aspiring Coffin.

"Ef I hed on'y hed sense tew folly him, 'stid ov givin' him the chainece tew folly me!"

With an internal groan over the chance he had lost Hezekiah halted and sunk down to consider over the prospect.

Such thoughts came too late, however. He recognized that he could not go back and take up the trail where it parted from his, and finally turned toward the trail once more, determining to seek Right Bower and run the chances.

From time to time he had heard noises in the distance, but for a little all had been quiet. Now, though he had to listen keenly to hear it, after the slightest of sounds had arrested his attention, there was evidence that he was being followed.

Once in a while he could hear a soft footfall or the brushing of a twig, though the noise he made in his own progress, light though it was, for the most part drowned out the other.

He had wit enough to know that if any danger threatened him it would be unsafe for him to halt. The act would prove he had a suspicion and was on his guard. It might, even, cause an immediate attack.

It could not be far to the trail, and if there was to be an assault Hezekiah preferred it should come where there was more light than in this dingle, where it was possible for an ambush spring to be made almost from his side. As a stranger his voice would not be recognized, and he would be in so much the more danger. Doggedly he kept on, his ears on the alert for the slight sounds he now and then heard, and puzzling his brains for some plan by which he might drop the unwelcome trailer without coming to an attempted explanation.

Luck stood his friend.

Stepping with extra caution for a few moments, he heard other sounds, and recognized that there was some one in front of him.

At once he formed an idea.

There was no question but what he was being trailed, and the party behind was accommodating his progress to that of the man he followed.

The man in front was simply moving cautiously ahead, and at a slower gait, even, than that of Hezekiah. If this thing kept up for any distance he would undoubtedly be overtaken, unless alarmed.

The Yankee stepped more lightly than ever, until he made not a sound. If the man behind could but hear the steps of the one in front his game would be made.

Chance favored him a little more. A slight blunder located the man in front, and Hezekiah dropped silently and swiftly to the ground, at once creeping softly out of the way.

The game worked to a charm. Evidently the one in the rear heard the sound and fancied that in some mysterious way he had been suddenly losing ground, which he ought to make up. He increased his speed and passed Hezekiah without a suspicion of the third man who had been shuffled off on him.

Coffin knew nothing of the ground, and his only way to keep his bearings was to follow this gulch until he came to the trail. Presently he arose and followed. He would a good deal rather have been out of the affair altogether than obtain a view of the denouement he imagined was coming, but there was nothing else for him to do.

He fancied the trail was not far away; nor was he wrong.

He soon caught a glimpse of a light patch of ground and projected against

it an indistinct object, upon which a second object suddenly flung itself with the spring of a tiger.

Hezekiah had no desire to linger to see which of the two, who immediately went rolling over in a snarling struggle, would come out on top.

He was curious as the most, but this was not the time to ask questions, but to take advantage of the opportunity. He hurried past the struggling pair, found the trail at the distance of but a few rods, and without delay turned his face toward Right Bower, the lights of which he saw twinkling in the distance. There were always lamps there which burned until daybreak.

He passed the spot where the turn for Munson's residence was made, and could see the dull glow of the embers, with now and then a little flicker of flame. The house was now but a heap of coals and cinders.

The crowd had not altogether deserted the spot, and for a moment he thought of boldly rejoining it, but the risks deterred him, and he continued on his course. Luckily, as it seemed, there was no one at that moment bound in the same direction.

For the present danger appeared to be over, and he strode along, head down and eyes half closed, thinking over what had happened. He had almost fallen into a reverie, when he felt a resounding thump on his back and heard the voice of Posy Pete:

"Bully fur you, pard. You's ther jay-bird I war lookin' fur. How yer bin a-makin' ov ett?"

"Why, Pete! I swan tew grashus!"

"Pete she am, an' wantin' ter know fur why yer throwed off on yer pard, a-leavin' him ter make ther fight ov his life, an' all fur your sake. Mebbe a-stickin' his own thrapple in ther noose a-doin' ov ett."

"Yew don't mean tew say?" exclaimed Hezekiah, catching a glimmering of the meaning of this speech.

"You bet I do. I got a keen eye, ef I am in a rough an' tum'mle, an' I knowed yer when yer slipped past. Ef I'd 'a opened out I might 'a' bin all right, but ett would 'a' bin mighty dry fur you. I seed yer go inter ther house."

"Dew yew think a'ry wun else did?" asked Hezekiah, startled greatly.

"Sh'ld guess not. I war a-lookin' fur yer."

"But ef they did?"

Pete made a suggestive gesture under his ear, stretching his neck and dropping his jaw at the same time.

"That's w'ot, pard."

"But that man—he must hev s'pectid s'uthin. Whar did you leave him?"

Again the Sunflower Sport laughed.

"Johnny's on ther spot. Put his head in a bag, w'ich ther same war his own coat, tied him hand an' foot, an' he kin git out ov ther mux ther best way he kin. I'm solid with ther gang, an' he didn't see me. Now, you reel off yer own yarn. Whar's thet sharp; an' w'ot become ov ther young sport thet raised ther racket?"

Under other circumstances, Hezekiah might have hesitated about confiding his story to the man by his side; but, as he knew so much already, there was little to be lost in supplying the links of which he was ignorant.

Hastily he told his story.

"We're in ther thick ov ett, pard," said Posy, when the tale was finished. "Yer didn't let him s'pishun yer wur on ther tective line?"

"Wael, I ain't plum a fool. In course not. When he come outen the back room whar I wuz a-watchin' I jist hitched on, an' we kim up on ther tail eend ov ther hippydrome. When he axed me ef I wuz game tew help save a life I 'lowed ef it warn't dangerous; an' after that we hung together tell the heft ov the fun wuz over."

"Ef you'd on'y follered him up; but that's all right, pard. Yer got a dead cinch on him, an' I'll slash aroun' on ther out-kirts, keepin' a lookout fur you tell we kin snatch him. In course, we got ter

hev proof; but ef yer works ett right he'll give hisself away, sure. Keep near him, pard; keep near him. We got thet ten thousand rounded up, an' all we got ter do are ter drive ett in ther kerrell."

"But how about the murder? An' fur why wuz he takin' up for the young man?"

"When we git outen ther one we'll hev ther inside track on t'other. Ther kid war wun ov ther agents, ov course. Ef you hedn't bin a ding-blasted igeot, an' let yerself git throwed off, we'd 'a knowed all about ett."

"Hush!"

Hezekiah gave his partner a push. They had entered Right Bower, but were talking in so low a tone there was little danger of being overheard.

Just at this moment a man was passing on the other side of the street, and each recognized that it was Steelgrip Steve.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STIR IN THE HORNET'S NEST.

When Thomas Gregory heard the lock shattered by the pistol shot he felt satisfied the party was not only very much in earnest, but that it was after him, and that it was time to make himself scarce.

He closed the secret door, and waited to see what was to come next.

There was no delay, for almost at once the men entered the cabin.

He could hear them quite plainly, though there seemed to be no chink through which he could obtain a view of what was going on.

"Steady there!" exclaimed a harsh voice.

"Leave everything exactly as it is. It may be worth while not to have him know there have been visitors of our style."

"But that lock, boss? Ett's busted wide open, an' I reckon he ain't blind."

"Let him explain that the best way he can. It is a dollar to a dime he don't hit the right track. If he does so much the worse for him. Keep in a line, and fingers to yourselves."

There was something singular about all this, and when the party moved straight to the hidden door Tom Gregory waited no longer.

With a very clear idea that his hiding place was known he slipped away just before the door swung open.

He had made some little exploration of the hiding place, and knew that it seemed to stretch back indefinitely; but he had not dared to wander far. Now, with the light extinguished and no clear knowledge of what to expect after he had proceeded for a little, he edged slowly away from the dangerous neighborhood.

Haste would profit him little, and he decided to barely keep himself ahead of this party until he should find some outlet or safer place of concealment, or until his progress was stopped altogether.

In the latter case, there was nothing for him but to fight to the death if discovered. He knew well enough it would never do for him to be taken alive by the men of Right Bower.

He could hear the footsteps coming after him; and immediately upon entering the passage they had lighted a lantern, so that it was not hard for him to tell how much he was in the lead.

Outside of that the light did him no good! though, if he had chosen to turn at bay, he might have given them the surprise of a lifetime.

When he thought of it he closed his teeth hard and ground back the idea. Even to secure his own safety he did not wish to think of such slaughter as he knew he might make.

After a little he could tell by the feeling of the air that he had changed from a narrow passage to a cave; and to keep his bearings he continued to press his right elbow lightly against the wall which all along had been his guide.

Whichever this was taking him he had no idea, nor did he think his chances of escape were brilliant. He might be able to hide in this cavern; but these men seemed to know a great deal more about it than he did and would probably ferret

out every lurking place before they gave over the search. As a guard would no doubt be placed at the opening, there would be little chance to double back on them and make his exit while the search was proceeding. Surely it could not be done without a fight for it and possibly the killing of a sentinel.

Several times he halted and looked back, waiting until he could actually count the figures coming on.

They moved without hesitation, and did not seem inclined to hug the wall, as Gregory was doing. If they continued to diverge from his course he began to have a scheme to circumvent them. When it was safe, he would lie down under the shadow of the wall and allow them to pass.

After that he could creep cautiously back and keep up the dodging as long as it was safe or necessary.

This seemed better than to go on indefinitely and perhaps drift into another narrow passage, where he would be cornered without remedy.

Thinking of this, his steps grew slower and slower. He was allowing them to overhaul him up to the outside limits of safety. He looked back over his shoulder, decided that the time had come; and just then, from the darkness in front, came a stern challenge, which rung harshly through the stone chamber:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Along with the voice sounded the sharp click of a forced-back hammer, both from no great distance.

Without a thought of anything but immediate safety, Gregory threw himself forward, stretching out his hands to save himself from the shock of the fall.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, his calculations were doomed to miscarry.

His hands found no resting place, and he pitched head first down into a chasm which had opened before him.

Mechanically, he closed his lips tightly, and if he made any slight noise it was drowned by the answer to the challenge, which at once came back:

"Friends with the countersign."

"Come forward, friend, and give the password."

The party halted, all save one man, who moved on toward the voice until his hands rested against a low wall of stone directly across his track.

Here he bent forward, and whispered: "Diamonds for trumps."

"Correct you are; advance the rest."

Without more ado the rest came on, man after man clambering over the barricade. As the last one passed the sentinel spoke:

"Where is the other man?"

"There is no other man," was the answer. "We're all here."

"Not much, you ain't. There were seven of you out there, and only six have climbed in."

"Your eyesight must have been a little off. Only six of us were there."

"I tell you I counted them against the light. Six there were, all in a bunch, and one a piece ahead. You don't get me on any such little snaps, and then give me away to the boss. You bring up that other man, or I'll begin to pump lead."

"Hold on, Tom! There must be some mistake about it. There was nobody about the shanty when we got there—made sure of that before we showed up. Everything was straight as a string, and if there had been any stranger in the hole with us we would have known it sure. Listen to reason and let up."

"If he didn't come with you he must have been ahead of you, for I swear to the other man, and you don't go farther till you find him. That's business, chuck up."

The sentinel was thoroughly determined, and his words began to make an impression.

"You're wrong, Tom; but we'll take the lantern and give a search. If any galoot turns up down he goes, even if it's one of the boys. A trick like that won't pass."

With the lantern burning brightly and their revolvers drawn, the six went back

to make the search, and, as they were well acquainted with the ground, they had little doubt of being able to find the lurker, in case one was there.

The natural place to look was the exact spot where Tom Gregory really did disappear. It was known to these men, and they approached the gash in the ground with caution. The idea of an accident never struck them, but it was possible an intruder had there found a hiding place.

The chasm, such as it was, showed but a narrow opening, and in places a man could almost have stepped across it in a regular stride. Its edges, however, were clear-cut, and it was not more than a dozen feet to the bottom.

First, the lantern was held over the top; then it was let down by a cord, and the bottom searched.

Not a sign did they obtain of any intruder.

Below the surface the gash seemed to widen out, but the overhanging sides did not conceal any part of the bottom until, sloping on down, it passed under the side wall of the cave. Where it led to even these men did not know.

"If he's there I reckon it's to stay. A monkey couldn't climb up."

The party was the more easily satisfied because nearly every one felt more or less sure the sentinel had been mistaken. It was a great surprise when, as they were turning away, the report of a gun rang through the cavern, followed by a gurgling, half-suppressed cry.

The noise came from where the sentinel was stationed, and toward that point there was an immediate rush.

They found the guard on the ground, and, though he was alive and moving, it was plain he had received sudden and rough treatment.

He crawled up on his hands and knees to face his friends, and excitedly gurgled out:

"After him, boys. He'd have done for me if you hadn't been on hand. Jump! If he comes in on the boss without warning he'll slaughter you all."

CHAPTER XVII.

TOM GREGORY TO THE RESCUE.

Gregory had been lucky in more ways than one. It is true he dropped into the gash at great bodily risk, but his hand struck a projecting knob of rock on the opposite wall, and he was enabled to hang there until the men he was trying to dodge had gone by. Then he straightened himself out, and by pressing his hands hard against the rocks while his feet were braced against those on the other side he walked himself out of the trap.

Instead of attempting to beat a retreat he crawled in their wake, and overheard the conversation which followed from a nearer position than was at all safe. When the half dozen turned back to search for him he was actually lying close to the rocky wall behind which the sentinel was stationed.

For the present, his retreat in the direction whence he had come was cut off, and the plan he had previously formed began to seem impracticable. If he waited where he was, the light would fall full upon him when the men turned, and the next thing would be a volley.

What there was ahead, he could not even guess; but he was tempted to try it; and the action of the sentinel decided him.

Perhaps he had made an incautious movement; or, it may have been caused only by a feeling of uneasiness, but the man above leaned forward, and with cocked weapon uttered a low challenge.

In an instant Gregory was up, and over the parapet, just as the shot rang through the cavern.

The bullet whistled close to his ear, but before there was time for another Tom had the man by the throat and thigh.

There was nothing that might be called a struggle. The attack was so sudden that before the fellow could brace himself for it he was down, falling with

a crash that would have made one's bones ache to hear.

There was no time to do farther damage, and Gregory was already sufficiently armed. He darted away, following a path which he found by instinct, but which, after he had thumped against the stone wall at a turn, was faintly outlined by a light at the farther end.

The sight of the light caused him to slacken his pace.

As yet he heard no sound of immediate pursuit, and he began to think there was more of a mystery about this matter than he had at first comprehended.

Half a dozen men were behind him; how many more were in front?

Up to this moment he had no idea except that these were men from Right Bower in pursuit of him. If that was a mistake they still might be just as dangerous. Until forced forward it might be as well to proceed with caution.

Stealing softly forward, he presently heard a voice, in the low murmur of conversation, and though he saw no one, he could locate the sound as not far beyond the spot where he could see the light. Evidently, there was a chamber there of some kind, in which the speaker was hidden.

He had no time to stop and consider the situation. Without a doubt the men behind would follow as soon as they had investigated the plight of their comrade; more than likely they were already on the way. He could see nothing of them, and, as the passage was known to them, if they remained silent they might steal up upon him without his being able to detect their coming.

The only plan was to go ahead. He doubted being able to find any avenue of exit, but there might be a chance to stumble upon a hiding-place; meantime, it was his business to keep out of reach of everybody. The sounds of voices became plainer as he advanced. He even made out the last few words of a sentence. Then, a woman began to talk.

She was evidently flaming with wrath, while her companion spoke with a low, cool drawl, enough to exasperate a listener just to hear it.

It seemed, indeed, as though a crisis of some kind was near, and Gregory hurried his steps, though coming none the less silently.

"You fiend!" rose the woman's voice.

"You dare boast like that to me? It is well for you I have not the power, or another moment would see you dead at my feet."

"That is it, my child. The power happens all to be on the other side, and you will listen to a little plain talk, straight from the rattles. As I understand it the game lies about this way. The old man is dead."

"I demand that you stop right there."

"Ha, ha! At this late hour in the day you don't suppose you can impose on me with your high and mighty airs. You ought to be glad and thankful to listen to what is coming."

"While you keep me here as a prisoner I refuse to listen to any proposition you may try to make. Persist, and one of us dies."

The female voice sank a little lower, and became deadly cool. As Gregory peered into the apartment he found the man not half a dozen feet away, his back toward the opening. A yard, perhaps, beyond, and facing him with hand upraised, was the woman.

The way the light fell her face was in the shadow, but dress and figure seemed to say she was young and supple.

"Be done with these heroics. You know who I am; and I don't think I am altogether ignorant of who is my honored guest. Any stage-struck nonsense will only make it the harder for you and I to come to an understanding. And if we don't—it will be awfully bad for you."

"Not worse than the reality of what you have just been threatening. There is nothing that could be. Death, sooner; and if I must die it may as well be while fighting."

"Now, close, my dear!"

He moved toward her a short pace as he spoke, and suddenly she flew at him like a wildcat, with one hand striking him full in the face, whilst with the other she snatched at a pistol in his belt.

A snarling curse dropped from the lips of the man as he clutched at her shoulder, the blow on the cheek only serving to rouse his anger. In an instant she would have crumpled in his clutch if Tom Gregory had not stepped in.

He had already delayed longer than he cared to, listening to the speakers, to be sure, but his eyes roving around the room in search of some other means of exit.

There could be no question of what he was to do, desperate though the chances might seem. Without hesitation he launched himself at the man, who, he was now assured, must be an outlaw—perhaps, even, Captain Diamond himself.

His blow, delivered squarely on the back of the neck, sent the outlaw crashing to the floor, where he lay, quivering faintly. It looked as though his spinal cord was broken, but Gregory took no time to investigate. His pursuers could not be far away, and he must either brace himself for fight or begin flight.

At his unexpected appearance the girl gave a little cry, and cowered back. If this new-comer was an outlaw she was by no means certain the exchange of masters would be profitable. She would even have turned away when Gregory caught her hand.

"Come, miss! Do not be afraid to trust yourself with me. I am fugitive myself, and the gang will be here in an instant. If there is no road of escape the fight must be made right here. Probably it will be a hopeless one, but I will do the best I can. If you desire to do so, give yourself up to them before it begins. If not, crouch in one corner as well out of the way as you can."

"You do not belong to the band of Captain Diamond?"

"No. I am fleeing from it."

"Then, there is a hope. This way. We will find but one man beyond, and between us we should be able to take care of him."

Her hand closed on Tom's with nervous strength, and she dragged him away. In the farther corner hung what he could now see was a curtain.

Thrusting this aside, an opening was disclosed. Through this they darted without hesitation, the curtain dropping behind them, urged forward by muffled voices from the apartment they had just left.

"I took good note of the way, and there will be no trouble till we come to the guard. If we can only reach him without giving the alarm it will not be hard to work our way out. If he hears us we must risk a shot and rush on him," she said, giving Gregory's hand a firmer pressure.

"Do not think of taking a hand in such a trouble. When the time comes, slip by. Whether I win or lose, you will be safe."

"Thanks, but we are in this together. You came in my hour of need, and I will not desert you. Be silent, now. We are almost there."

"It is time. The gang behind are coming. Hark!"

A shout rang through the passage, evidently intended to put the sentinel on his guard, and at the cry the two leaped forward, silently but swiftly. The time for talk had passed.

CHAPTER XVIII. A BOLD DEFIANCE.

If the outlaw on guard had been in the passage he must have taken the alarm; and the escape of the two would have been rendered a thing of danger, if not impossible.

Fortunately, he was in the open air, and some few yards away from the spot where the tunnel ended.

He was watching the outside approaches, never dreaming of danger from within, and so Gregory came upon him like a cyclone.

It was just light enough for the fugitives to indistinctly see the dark outline of his figure, as he bent forward to gaze down the gorge in front of him. Gregory never hesitated.

His sole hope lay in being able to go straight on, wasting no time in conflict, and had he shot the outlaw down on the spot the circumstances would have seemed to him to justify the act.

He did think of it in his desperation, but remembered the men close behind, and suddenly reversing the revolver in his right hand, he struck a fearful blow as he came within distance.

The sentinel had at last caught the sounds from his rear, and still unconscious of danger, was slowly turning.

At that the clubbed weapon caught him high up on the forehead and crushed him to earth.

Gregory stooped just long enough to wrench away his arms, and then was ready.

Once more they clasped hands and darted down the narrow gorge before them.

"If we can once get out of this trap," the woman panted, "we can find a hiding place. We must outstrip them. If they overtake us it means death to both of us."

"Courage. The way grows wider. There is more light ahead. And if the worst comes to the worst I am not so sure the slaughter will all be on one side. Those villains are fair game, and I certainly shall not shoot wild for the sake of mercy."

Excitement lent them speed, and perhaps their pursuers lost more time than they were aware of over their fallen comrade. The two finally burst out of the mouth of the gorge with a fair lead, and turned sharply to the right.

The ground now was sloping, but smooth. Gregory at first was in doubt as to their course, but his companion did not hesitate.

"Do not linger. It may be half a mile to the trail which leads over the mountain to Right Bower. I cannot rest until we are safe beyond their reach."

Again they hurried on, but now in silence. Before long they came to the thread of a trail they were seeking, and here Gregory again hesitated. They could hear a clatter of horses' feet coming down the road, and though it might be another detachment of Diamond's men, it was more likely to be a party from Right Bower.

"It will be as well to take to hiding here. If those men coming are to be trusted you can make yourself known. I have reason for not caring to meet them just at present, if they are from the town. I have done all I could for you, and if you are inclined to be grateful I would ask that you do not mention me, or give them any idea that I am near."

It was a strange request to make, and for the first time the two gazed fixedly, each in the face of the other.

Then the young woman started back with a cry of surprise.

In the man who had come to her rescue, and piloted her out of danger, she recognized Tom Gregory; whilst he saw before him Ida Munson, the young lady who had the night before knotted the rope, so to speak, all ready for his neck. If he was not this very minute swinging from a tree on the major's lawn it certainly was not her fault. She had done her best toward such a consummation.

"Good heaven!"

Miss Munson stared at him as if she had seen a ghost, and was by far the more agitated of the two. Gregory took the revelation which had come upon him quite coolly.

He was the first to recover his wits and find speech.

"Pardon me for asking a favor which, perhaps, you will not care to grant now that you know the speaker. I admit I did not recognize you until now, but had I done so from the first my course would have been the same."

"The murderer! And to him I owe my life!"

"Pardon me for insisting; but you are as much mistaken as can be. I was attracted to the house by a cry from your lips, and found you fainting and the major dead. When you opened your eyes you could not understand that time had elapsed; and believed I was the assassin."

She shook her head firmly, her brow frowning and her lips compressed.

"Enough. It is a possible explanation did I not know. Save it for others. I will not prove ungrateful. Make your escape while you can, but henceforth keep out of my way. If we meet again I may only remember the voice of my uncle crying from the ground."

"If you tell your story that way to any jury in the land you will hang an innocent man. It is folly to try to convince you until the real man is taken and the truth shown. I will do all of that. Then you shall do me justice, or—"

"Or what?" she asked, seeing that he broke off shortly in his speech.

"Or I will believe you are willing to sacrifice me to shield the real criminal. Such things have been done before this. If you try to murder me, beware!"

It was a chance shot, and though Gregory eyed her keenly he could not see that it told.

Her eyes met his with superb scorn, and she silently turned away.

"Pardon!" he cried after her, but she did not halt, only throwing out her hand to motion him back.

He had forgotten the sounds they had heard but a little before; the excitement of the discovery and the words that followed shut his ears to everything else. He stared after her; and she walked straight on toward a dozen horsemen who had suddenly shot around the bend not far away.

For an instant or two they were not seen; then, the eyes of the foremost man fell upon Ida Munson, and he gave a shout of recognition.

Even yet there would have been time for retreat if Gregory had only thought.

Unfortunately, he was too full of the charge this girl had brought against him to remember now that he was a fugitive whose neck was liable to be stretched on a moment's notice.

He went straight on, until suddenly a yell of hate and triumph, following the first one of pleasure at sight of Ida, recalled him to his peril.

It was too late to hide without being seen; almost too late to hope to escape. There was no delay in the action of the men, but at sight of him they came straight forward.

Gregory gave a hasty glance around.

There was no spot where he could hope to make a defense; and now he had been seen there was no direction he could turn without having them hot on his trail. With the courage of desperation he folded his arms and awaited the approach, which was not long delayed.

"Han's up!" shouted the leader.

It was the second time destiny had thrown him against the young man, since it was the same Olet Brayson who had been one of those discovering him at the major's.

"This time there won't be any gettin' away till ther court gives ther word. It looks ez though Miss Munson hed bin a-trailin' yer down, an' done ther job a heap sight better than we men ov Right Bower. But she kin take a back seat now. You can't draw ther wool over our eyes twice."

"I have no desire to draw the wool over your eyes, and all I have ever asked for was justice. You know that yourself."

"You'll git jestice, an' don't yer fidget ett," shouted Pete Porter, who was also of the crowd; "an' you'll git ett right now. Ther court hed made up ett's mind afore yer sloped, an' a tree hyer are ez good ez a tree out at Munson's. Git riddy, boys, ter see him climb."

It was rather a cold-blooded sort of proceeding, and if Tom Gregory had kept his lips closed it might have been the crowd would have contented itself with

threats and some indignities that would have done no great harm.

But Gregory gave way to anger at this reiteration of the charges, and this taking it for granted that they had been proved, when his side of the case had received no attention at all.

If die he must, better to die by bullet than the rope; and it would be at least a little satisfaction to try to save himself even though he knew the effort would fail. With a stroke of his left hand he knocked Brayson's revolver out of his grasp, and with a stroke of his right he felled Pete to the ground. Before the little knot of dismounted men could hurl themselves upon him he had flung himself on Pete Porter's horse, and, with a shout of defiance, dashed away.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LYNCH COURT REASSEMBLES.

It must have been a momentary madness which possessed the young man. Apparently he might as well have attempted to commit suicide at once.

If the crowd was bent on killing him, as he believed, no better chance could have been offered it. Not a man there but was armed, and his back presented a mark that but few of them could have missed. Before he had gone five yards there was an ominous clicking as half a dozen hammers went back. If there had been a man there with a double-action revolver he would have been lost.

It was Pete Porter who, for the time being, saved him.

"Hold on, blast ye! Hold on! That kind don't want ter go out ov ther wet by honest lead. Let me at him. I'll rope ther hound, an' then give yer ther end ov ther string ter haul on."

As he shouted; in almost one time and motion Pete bounded from the ground, threw himself on the horse of Chet Brayson, and started in pursuit. There was a coiled rope on the saddle, and no one knew better than Porter how to use it.

It was as exciting as a round-up, and the crowd were the more willing to give Pete his chance because they saw the young man was headed straight for Right Bower. As quickly as they had been drawn, pistols were thrust away, the men climbed into their saddles, and all save Chet Brayson thundered along in hot pursuit.

For a few rods Gregory seemed to gain. His horse had got into its stride before that of Porter got to going.

After that the chances appeared to become about even for pursuers and pursued. One might have thought the two horses to the front were tied together, so even was their stride and speed.

From time to time Gregory turned to cast a backward glance over his shoulder.

After each one of these glances he seemed to urge his horse onward more fiercely; but Pete held his distance all the same.

"By George! Pete's playin' with him!" exclaimed one of the leaders in the second flight of the followers. "He's steerin' him plum inter Right Bower. Bet yer a dollar he ropes him right in front ov ther Latter End, an' ther hull town'll hev a chance ter see ther fun."

It began to look like it to these men, who knew the speed of the two horses to a fraction, and believed that Pete could have forged along faster from the very start had he so chosen.

For some little distance they thus rode before Tom Gregory became aware of the fact that every step was taking him nearer to the town. In the first hurry of his flight all he had thought of was to get away from these thugs as soon as, and in any direction, possible.

Then, it became too late to turn aside. If he could scarcely hold his own on the level trail, with his pursuers all well in his rear, the chance would all be against him if he ventured into the unknown, broken ground, and allowed these men on his flank.

The ground on this side of the town

was unfamiliar, and he looked in vain for an opening to the side. So far he had not cared to provoke a discharge of firearms. If that once started, his hope of escape would be more slender than ever.

He was new to this sort of work, while the chances were more than one of the men could drop his horse at the first shot fired.

He looked back again. The whole party seemed to have crept up as if they were closing in. He shut his teeth hard, struck more fiercely with his heels against the flanks of his horse; but the yells and hurrah behind grew louder and closer than ever.

Then the trail before him grew more distinct, and between the banks on either side a way opened out, with a sight of Right Bower beyond. He was driving straight down upon the town, without a way of escape.

He must either throw up his hand, go on to the camp, or turn and fight.

On he urged his horse at racing speed, and louder yet behind him arose the cry of his pursuers. It beat fox-chasing two to one, this marking down a human quarry; and the men who were riding to the kill would have as little thought of shooting as would a bevy of true hunters riding to the cry of the hounds.

He could see he had the heels of them all except Pete Porter.

The rest were slowly but surely slipping back. Inch by inch he drew away from them.

Still, Pete had never pushed his mount to its utmost speed, and handled it with the judgment of a born jockey. Carefully he measured with his eye the distance between them, and, as they drove fairly into the long main street of the town, he almost imperceptibly lessened it. From his throat there issued a series of terrific yells, while he whirled the noosed rope above his head.

Down the street they clattered, Gregory glancing from this side to that like a rat in a trap, and thinking, meantime, that the end had about come.

It was not likely he could run the gantlet of the town without some one taking a shot at him. Were he even an utter stranger the temptation would be too great to be resisted.

And just at the front of the Latter End Pete Porter made his cast.

If it had depended upon Gregory, that young man would have gone out of the saddle a good deal faster than from a shot. The loop sped very true to its aim, and slight wonder would it have been if the fall cost him a broken neck.

Pete's horse saved him.

The creature had been looped before, and knew the meaning of the cast when his master threw the knotted coil.

He stopped on the spot, his feet rooted into the soil of the street, tail and head sunk low, and he remained quivering, but otherwise motionless as a statue.

The horse that Tom Gregory was on knew a thing or two, also.

He came to a halt with the same suddenness, every muscle braced for the expected shock—which did not come.

So they stood, right in the centre of Right Bower, the rope hanging loosely between the two men, the noose encircling Gregory's shoulders.

At the further end of the street behind them the rest of the crowd came howling along, shooting and yelling as they rode; and from every side men hurried out to see what was the matter.

It had been no secret when Brayton, Porter, and the rest, left town, and their errand was well known. When they returned in this fashion it was not hard to guess their victim, even if his face had been more unfamiliar than it was.

Out jumped a dozen men with drawn weapons, who came at Gregory from all sides.

"It's him! It's the bloody murderer!" they snarled. "This time he don't get away, and we'll finish it up a-whoomin'."

From the moment the rope dropped lightly around his shoulders, and the

mustang under him quit, Tom did not make a voluntary motion.

It is true, he came near going headforemost out of the saddle, under the influence of the sudden shock; but his knees gripped the seat like iron, and when he had bowed and then straightened he seemed as cool as man could be.

And the first man who laid a hand on his bridle was Dunk Deacon, who had occupied the chair as Judge Lynch at the time of the trial at the major's.

"Stiddy, young man. No use ter kick. This time yer don't git away. You jest make up yer mind ter take yer gruel ez it comes. You won't hev yer troubles fur long."

It was lucky Duncan was there to take possession of him. At other hands he might have received rougher treatment. As it was, he slipped down from his horse under the cover of several revolvers, and stood silently waiting for what was to come next. Until the immediate intentions of the crowd were developed there was no use for him to open his lips.

In fact, the clamor around him would have soon prevented his voice from being heard. Every living soul in the town seemed to be emptied on the street, and all shouting at once.

Then, just in time to head off a mad rush, which seemed to have spontaneously been suggested to a dozen or two at the same instant, half a dozen men took possession of him and forced their way through the crowd to the porch of the Latter End.

They had come at the call of Judge Lynch; and at their head was Steelgrip Steve, who barely had the chance to lean over and whisper:

"Keep your nerve up, young man. It's not all lost yet."

At the same time Deacon was shouting:

"Hold on, boys. Respect ther dignity ov ther court. This hyer thing hez got ter begin whar it left off; but we'll do it up in shipshape, or know the reason why."

There were plenty shouting for immediate execution; but they began their rush a shade too late. The guards looked very firm, and the man at their head was a tower of himself; though even such a party would be swept away if there seemed the least chance the young man might ultimately escape.

In less time than it would take to tell of it, the court was once more organized, right in front of the saloon, judge and prisoner on the porch, with the guard ranged around them.

"This time, gents all, thar won't be no chance of any hanky-panky. He's hyer, and he'll stay hyer tell ther court passes sentence. Whar did we leave off?"

"Let Pete tell his story. Then we kin git on ther string ag'in," suggested a voice from the crowd.

Pete had yielded up his prisoner without much reluctance, and came forward promptly when called on.

When he described the meeting with Ida Munson such a yell went up that Gregory could have been pardoned for believing that his last hour had come.

When the noise had died down a little Porter began to talk again, and curiosity brought silence.

"An' whar's Miss Munson now?" asked the judge, with much interest.

"Reckon she's a-comin' along with Chet. Blamed ef we ever thought ov 'em, an' they got ter toddle along on footback. Git hyer in half a hour, mebber."

"Then, your honor, I move the court adjourn for a recess till the lady arrives. It wouldn't be exactly white to go ahead till she had a chance to see how the thing was being worked. And she may have a little bit of a story to add to what she has been saying."

The motion of Steelgrip was none too well received, but it seemed made in good faith, and to be favored by the judge. He had no suspicion the sport was only playing for time. A voice in the crowd shouted an amendment which

tickled the fancies of the most there considerably more.

"That's right; an' meanwhile we kin be ticklin' his hide with a quirt, an' see ef he won't tell how he got away. You bet he didn't go alone, an' Right Bower wants ter know who went with him."

"Move we git thar!" shouted another, and, with a thundering "Aye!" the whole packed mass surged forward.

CHAPTER XX.

BULGER'S BEST MAKE A FINE PLAY.

Hezekiah Coffin and Posy Pete had succeeded in getting into bed on their return from the necktie party at Major Munson's without attracting attention, or meeting with any untoward event; but they were not ready for sleep in spite of the march of the day and the excitement of the night. They were both interested in the mystery at Major Munson's, to which they fancied they had a clue.

Neither had finished the story of his adventures, and as they were alone, they talked the matters over in a low tone.

Pete, however, began to lose interest, and finally, when Hezekiah had been claiming the floor rather longer than usual dropped to sleep without a word of warning. The first intimation Hezekiah had that his words were falling on unlistening ears was the sound of a deliberate snore.

"Gosh hang it, he ain't goin' to make no sleuth. I'll reeport him tew Bulger. The right sort ov a man would know no rest, day ner night, ef he wuz on a clue sich ez ourn. Fur half a cent I'd wake him up and say it all over tew him ag'in."

As Pete was rather an uncertain quantity to handle when not treated according to his wishes, Coffin hesitated. While he was debating the matter with himself he heard a low whistle, which seemed to come from near their window.

It was most evidently a signal of some kind, and instantly Hezekiah was on the alert. That whistle had some meaning, and after the hint Posy had given him as to why he had chosen to stop at this house he wanted to know what it was.

At the same time he did not care to bear the burden of finding out all by himself. He did not hesitate a second, but catching the sunflower man by the shoulder gave him a gentle shake.

He was bending over the slumberer, anxious to give him warning at the earliest possible moment, and also prevent anything like an outcry, or a loud word. What followed was a surprise, and something as though he had held himself over a volcano in action, or plunged into a cyclone.

Pete's feet were galvanically gathered up till his knees almost touched his chin.

Then they shot up into the air—and Hezekiah shot up just ahead of them.

He was not certain but what he banged against the ceiling; but he fell like a squatting toad, on hands and feet, fairly outside of the bed.

There was a little, solid thump, as he landed, and away off in the corner of the room he heard the cocking of Pete's revolver. The sunflower sport had been as active as himself, and had leaped so swiftly, immediately on striking out with his feet, that he had gained his post of vantage and stood with weapon in hand, ready for whatever might come before Hezekiah had completed his aerial flight.

"What in Hepsidam air yew doin', Pete? Gosh hang ett, don't yew know ett air me?"

"War that you ez put a hand on my shoulder?"

"Ett wuz; but I don't know who I be now. I kim down like tew a angel, frum above, an' mebbe I be one."

Pete uncocked his revolver and came softly forward. Something in the voice of his companion told him it was not a time for noise; and up to date there really had been little made.

"Yer got her reedleskum grip, then,

an' you jest git enter ther fack thet yer don't want ter putt ett on my shoulder ag'in when I'm asleep. I dream mighty fast, an' kin work a shooter with eyes shut 'bout ez well ez with 'em open. Now, what is ett?"

Briefly Hezekiah told about the strange whistle he had heard, and the two listened.

Evidently the party outside had not been alarmed by the explosion in the room, for after a moment the signal sounded again, and this time considerably nearer.

"Jupiter jump up! He'll be in through ther winder next. Say—you lay low an' take ett all in w'ile I draws him on. Thar's a myst'ry 'bout this."

Holding his revolver ready in his hand, Pete crept softly toward the sash. He peered furtively out, and then gave an answer so like to the original whistle that both of them might have proceeded from the same lips.

The sound seemed to have been heard, for again came a signal from without, though the notes were slightly different.

Pete held his hand behind his back and motioned for Hezekiah to come forward.

Whether the sign was seen or not, Coffin got there.

"We got 'em on a string," hastily whispered the Sunflower Sport.

"Them ten thousand are good ez made; are ett halves?"

"Ett air."

"Then lay low an' keep yer ears open, but don't yer whimper, fur I'm runnin' this."

There was no time for answer before they heard a low voice, cautiously speaking:

"Is that you, boss?"

"Ett's so reported. What's wanted?"

"Come to report. All goes straight as a string, but we weren't sure where to find you. Lieutenant will give all the particulars when he sees you, and wants to know if you can meet him to-morrow."

"Cert. Whar will he be."

"He said if you could come he would meet you alone at the big rock on the Wingdam trail at three sharp. Does it go?"

"Everything goes. Tell him I'm all right up to ther present time, and I'll be thar."

"So long, then. It won't do to prowl long here. I've been chirruping for an hour. I'm off now."

Pete had kept his head down about on a level with the window sill, careful it should not be seen from without, and that his voice carried no farther on the night air than to the ears of the person to whom it was addressed.

He almost spoiled everything by the chuckle he gave as the man turned and stepped cautiously away.

"Didn't I told yer so!" he whispered, giving Hezekiah a noiseless slap on the shoulder.

"We jest worked him to ther king's taste. Ef we can't git ther boss, what's ther matter with gobblin' ther lieutenant? Ef we pinches him hard enough, you bet he'll squeal."

"B'gosh, ett looks ez though we air in luck. But where air the big rock, an' the Wingdam road?"

"Jest let that soak tell mornin'. They won't be hard ter find. An' then, ef you an' me cain't git away with ther luggage ov one man, we orter reetire."

"Yew air onto the string now. But, say. Ett looks ez though Diamund wuz in the house, neow. Couldn't we rus'sel him eout?"

"An' how'll yer know him?"

"Ain't we got a deescripshun?"

"I got two er three, but what good's that doin'? They don't none ov 'em look like him. Thar ain't nothin' ter hinder keepin' eyes open, tho; but our best holt air ther big rock on ther Wingdam road."

When they came out to breakfast at a late hour the next morning the town was too busy talking about the murder and

before to pay much attention to them, except when they asked questions.

The latter duty was left principally to Pete, and his partner could not but admire the way in which he elicited the information for which they were seeking. It would not do to make too early an exit, because, as strangers, there might seem something suspicious about their absence.

There was plenty of time before them, and it was something past noon when they quietly dropped out of town.

The idea was to be somewhere near the rock before the lieutenant put in an appearance, and take him in according to circumstances. If he turned out to be the man they thought he would there was a tidy little reward on him, also.

A better spot than the big rock could not have been found in which to lay an ambushade.

They approached the rock with the utmost caution, and so far as could be seen were the sole persons in the neighborhood. If things had been figured up rightly they would have a wait of at least an hour until the appearance of the lieutenant.

"Ef he's comin', reckon yander's about ther line he'll march," said Pete, pointing as he spoke.

"They must have a den som'eres in ther mount'ins. We must 'range ourselves accordin'."

Quite a military eye had the sunflower sport, taking in the advantages of the land at a glance. Hezekiah could see in a minute that his companion had hit the possibilities of the occasion.

There was no other route by which the spot could be approached without being seen from almost any point of the compass; and as the lieutenant was supposed to have ordinary caution, it stood to reason that over this course would he come, and over no other.

As a result, they ensconced themselves behind the very rock itself, and, making sure their revolvers were all ready for instant use, waited patiently.

They felt pretty sure the man would come; the only important question was whether he would come alone.

To that only time could supply the answer.

The spot had for them one disadvantage. They were little better able to command the route than any one at a different position. There were only two or three points where one approaching would be for an instant visible; and on those points they kept close watch.

"By ther jumpin' Jupiter, thar he kims now!" exclaimed Pete, at length, as a head momentarily appeared on the hidden trail.

"It's him!" whispered Hezekiah, his whole gaunt frame quivering with eagerness; and then—had the rock fallen on them?

CHAPTER XXI.

POSTY PETE ON HIS SHAPE.

Half a dozen men precipitated themselves on the two skulkers, and they did it in such a thorough and complete way there was no chance whatever for effective resistance.

"Take ett easy, pard. Don't kick an' ett'll be all ther better."

This much was all Pete had time to shout, when a gag was thrust in his mouth, and his hands were whipped behind him and securely tied.

Hezekiah made a little better showing. Though borne down upon his hands and knees, and seemingly crushed to earth by the three who were on his back, he humped himself, and began to buck like a ruined broncho. The heels of two men went up in the air higher than their heads had been, whilst the third went rolling over end, never stopping inside of a dozen yards.

But the two never lost their grip. When they came down again, one of them shifted his grasp to Hezekiah's hair, and jowelled his face down into the ground, whilst the other pulled an arm out on one side and pulled him over.

After that Coffin did not have even a fighting chance.

They did not proceed quite as far with him as they had done with Pete, for they left him free to talk—and very good use did he make of that freedom. His remarks, if not elegant, were emphatic. Like the hero of Scott's romance, in spite of a former candidacy for a deaconship he swore at large, glaring at his captors in a way that ought to have made their blood run cold.

Instead, they laughed cheerfully, and then became suddenly silent, as a new man appeared on the scene.

Like the six, he was masked, and his hand was upon one of the pistols in the web belt around his waist.

"Go through them," he said shortly, waving his hand at Hezekiah to indicate him as the starting point.

Without loss of time busy hands went through Hezekiah's pockets, placing their contents in the hands of the late arrival—who was undoubtedly the lieutenant himself.

The wallet previously mentioned was unfortunately almost the first thing discovered, and was certainly the first thing critically examined.

Hezekiah was not certain, but he had strong suspicions that that wallet was going to seal his doom. When the contents were drawn out for inspection he was more certain than ever.

"We made no mistake about it," growled the man, as he glared over the papers in his hand to take a searching look at Coffin.

"The scoundrel is a detective, come to hunt down better men than he has ever known. If he had his way we would swing; what shall we do with him?"

"Let him swing instead."

The answer came promptly, and seemed to be what was expected.

"Right you are. And this partner of his shall share the same fate. Examine him, though, and see if there is anything about him worth the handling."

Pete was powerless to object, and was subjected to a search which brought to light a duplicate package. It was evident he belonged to the same hated corps of detectives.

An ugly growl went around the circle.

"That settles it," said the masked leader, with cruel calmness.

"They both belong to the Bulger tribe, and, by heavens, they both hang."

"Hang 'em both," was the angry, unanimous echo.

There was such an air of intense earnestness about it that Posy Pete, who had been quietly resigning himself to the inevitable, gave a start, and showed a face full of mingled anxiety and bewilderment. Down to this moment it seemed as though he had not understood they were in any more physical danger than mere capture, and a little rough handling, perhaps.

The threat aimed at Hezekiah seemed at the time to have been a mere bluff.

The sentence was undoubtedly unanimously satisfactory to the outlaws, and the glance around which they gave meant simply that they were looking for the nearest trees.

Coffin was not half so much taken aback, if looks went for anything.

His lips at least were free, and he made use of his tongue.

"Dog-gone yew, do yew'r w'ust," he spluttered out.

"Do the w'ust yew dare, and ef I cain't play tew git even Bulger'll dew ett for me. I wuzn't arter yew, but ef the work ain't dun complete I'll rake yew all in some day. Maybe yew won't hang, but I sw'ar yew will go tew states pris'n."

"Good boy. I like pluck, and as it may be some satisfaction, I'll let you do the talking for both. The original plan was to swear yu in to secrecy and have you take the back trail; but we have come to the conclusion two such pards as you and Posy Pete—oh, we've heard of Pete before—might not stay started. We'll just have to make a clean job of it. Now, me."

tree the leader had in mind, and with the hand of an outlaw clutching his arm, whilst the other hand was ready with a revolver, Hezekiah stalked sullenly forward.

Pete was inclined to be sulky.

He had been treated rather the worse of the two, as he did not even have the poor satisfaction of using his tongue. He shook his head doggedly, and braced himself where he sat on the ground in a way which indicated he did not mean to move a step.

The outlaw leader saw the determination, and gave a peculiar jerk of the head.

The next instant two men had stooped swiftly, caught Pete by the ankles, and began to drag him along.

It was no light task for them; but neither was it a pleasant method of progress for him.

As his hands were firmly bound, and the power on his legs was irresistible, there was nothing for him to do but to come, which he did for some little distance after a fashion that bid fair to scrape the back of his neck down to the spine.

When the object lesson seemed to have been sufficient the leader made a motion, and Pete's legs were dropped.

"Maybe you'll step along peaceably now. If you don't, I swear we'll bury you right where you lie."

The Posy was gone by this time, and the man who had been wearing it rose sullenly to his feet. He glared at Hezekiah as though blaming him in some way for having been caught in such a trap, and then started forward as if intending to obey orders, and march to his own execution.

Then, suddenly, his course was changed, he turned toward the outlaw leader, both feet flew up into the air, and quick as a lightning flash were planted, the one in the breast and the other in the bread-basket of his unsuspecting victim. His hands might be tied, and his mouth stuffed with a gag, but he was not altogether helpless yet.

The man went down with a grunt and a gasp. The breath had been thoroughly knocked out of him, and had he been alone he would have fared but poorly, for it would not have stopped at that.

Indeed, Pete gave one spring forward, as though about to leap upon the prostrate man, but he had kicked harder than he knew. It would have taken three or four more bounds to carry him to the goal, and meantime there were half a dozen armed men who would have got over their surprise, and could be getting in their work.

He turned, darted at the man who flanked him on the side toward Right Bower, and lowering his head, went at him like a battering-ram.

The fellow did not wait for the charge, but with an exclamation of affright cast himself so suddenly out of the way that he went tumbling heels over head, whilst Pete went by like a whirlwind. It really was wonderful, the way he got over the ground.

Hezekiah might have been tempted to make the same kind of an effort had he not been taken by surprise.

Unfortunately, he was not ready for it during the few seconds in which there was a possibility of success. While every eye was turned in the direction of the fugitive would have been his chance to have fled in the other direction. After that—a revolver at his head was warning enough of what he might expect if he undertook a flight.

Pursuit of the Posy Sport would have begun a moment later had it not been for the sudden appearance of a horseman, who swept up to the spot.

"Eyes open!" he shouted as he came.

"Half of Right Bower is on the way, and will be here in a minute. It will be either fight or get under cover."

"Cover goes," grated the outlaw leader, who had risen painfully from the ground. "It is too late to follow him now. If some of you runners had shot first and I had shot last, afterward it

might have saved the lot of us. Now, we have got to take our chances. Bring this hound along. There is a thing or two to find out from him before he goes up the flume. Get a move on, quick. There is no time to spare."

The orders were obeyed with marvelous promptness, and soon, with their prisoner among them, the men passed out of sight—all save one, who remained hidden to watch for the coming of the Right Bower contingent.

It was a fact that such a body was approaching, though hardly in such force as reported. They were beating the ground, and taking their time to it; and Posy Pete almost ran into the arms of the men in the front rank.

He halted in time to escape observation, however, and considered the situation. Some men might have thought the arrival in the neighborhood an opportune one; but he was not so sure of it. His present plight was not exactly the one he cared to be seen in when he appeared before the good citizens; and if he made correct explanation they would know as much as he did, which was not according to his hand as he understood it.

Carefully he kept out of the way without falling back toward the spot lately left, and eventually succeeded in flanking the party.

After that, he was more at his ease mentally if he was mighty uncomfortable in body, and he followed from the rear, watching eagerly to see what they were going to do. For the present he allowed Hezekiah to look after his own safety, shrewdly suspecting that nothing much would happen to him whilst these people of the town were in the neighborhood.

From a safe distance, after a weary watching, he saw the meeting of the other fugitives, who had made their escape from the cave, and was more interested than ever. He saw the flurry when Gregory darted away, and he saw, too, that Chet Brayson followed along on foot, for the moment forgetting all about the young lady, who had discreetly kept in the background.

She stood, hesitating and in thought, after being thus left alone, and suddenly Posy Pete stepped out in front of her, at which she gave a light cry of alarm.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SUNFLOWER SPORT ON HAND.

The appearance of such a battered specimen of humanity, with a gag in his mouth and his hands tied behind his back, was a distinct shock, and it hardly struck the young lady at first sight that unless she aided him he could not prove very dangerous.

Miss Munson drew back, uncertain whether to scream or run away.

Pete was equal to the occasion. The smile which he directed at her would have split a board, his head waved reassuringly, and then he flopped down on his knees and rolled up the whites of his eyes beseechingly.

She looked at him, and Pete cocked up his chin in a way to make his meaning plain. Gathering courage, Ida removed the gag and then stepped back for an explanation before going farther. Until she knew who he was and what was the cause of his present condition it might be just as well to allow his hands to remain in bondage.

"Now, then, who are you, and what do you want?"

"Adorable madam," snuffled Pete, after he had gasped three or four times, and rubbed his jaw as well as he was able on the point of his shoulder; "I'm Posy Pete, a leetle bit ago ther man with ther sunflower, w'ich ther same I ain't got now; an' I want me han's loose. After that, I'm yer 'umble an' 'bedeyunt servant ef yer needs me. Ef ett so happens yer don't, w'ich I think yer do, I'm goin' on ther war-path. I kin stand bein' a door-mat for or'nary pu'ppose, but blame me ef they shell use me ter clean old shoes w'ith."

"That may all be, but I would like to

know how you come to be in this predicament, and which way that war-path leads, before I do more."

"I ain't tellin' yer no lie, miss, an' ef so be yer b'longs to 'em, I'll run ther chainces. Ett war ther bloody road-agents w'ich brung me ter these, findin' ez I war hard on the'r track, an' me an' my pard bein' caught a-nappin'."

"It seems to me you look more like a road-agent yourself."

"Thankee, mum, for ther complement, but I ain't no sich prosp'rous individooal, but on'y a poor detective, belongin' ter Bulger's agency, an' tryin' ter make a 'onest livin', s'piessin' vice. My pard an' me hed ther clue, an' war after Diamund, an' come nigh ter gittin' him. Ef he hedn't got us we'd 'a' hed him, sure. Ef you wants ter help ther law, an' do a good turn ter you an meself, cut me loose fur glory's sake."

"You are a queer looking detective," declared Ida, thoughtfully.

"An' ett's a mighty queer bisniss. Jest ez well ter hev a friend in ther perfesh, miss; but ef you ain't got ther grit ter help me out, say so, an' I'll wagon on ter Right Bower. Diamund are liarable ter kim in sight 'most ary time."

Pete's voice had lost a good deal of its smoothness. The hesitancy of the young lady began to be more than provoking. She saw this and hastened to mollify him.

"You must confess you come in rather a bad shape to inspire confidence, but I begin to believe you are telling a straight story. There, Now, you had better take yourself off as fast as possible, I prefer to walk into Right Bower alone."

As she spoke, she skillfully opened the knots at his wrists, a job not as hard to do as it looked, and the tingling pains of a revived circulation began to shoot through his arms.

Pete stood thoughtfully looking the young lady over, rubbing first one wrist and then the other. He really felt a little weak. Under like conditions some men would have fainted away altogether.

Before long he was himself again.

"I needn't be a thankin' ov yer fur sich onexpected kindness. That goes without sayin'. But don't yer think, ef yer war so minded, you could give me a p'inter on them same road-agents? I'll ack fair, I sw'ar I will. Thar's a reeward ov ten thousand, an' me an' my pard are layin' out ter kerrel that boodle. Thar ain't nothin' mean 'bout us, an' ef you help we'll divy."

"I know nothing about the outlaws, and have already expressed a desire to be relieved of your company. Must I speak again?"

She looked at him sharply, and perhaps with regret. He was not nearly so safe a companion as he was before his wrists were untied.

"Sorry ter say, mum, I b'lieve yer stritchin' ther truth. I'm jest wun ov ther best men Bulger ever sot on a trail, an' when I git a clue like this hyer, I'm all thar, an' ain't likely ter let go."

"What is the meaning of such nonsense?"

"P'raps it ar' nonsense, an' p'raps ett arn't. I'm wun ov ther kind ez banks a hull heap on instinc', an' that's w'ot tells me you bin havin' a adventure with them same. You an' me ain't partin' company tell yer w'ispers w'ot yer knows. That's solid!"

The little eyes began to twinkle, and he spoke with as much dignified firmness as a man of his general appearance could command. Miss Ida looked anxiously from side to side, searching for some suggestion that might point out a way of escape.

"No yer don't. Sorry ter hev ter be vierlent, but this hyer are bizziness, chuck up, an' I mean ther hull ov ett."

"And I say—" but Ida said no more just then, for Pete gave a stealthy step forward, and as she attempted to spring away he leaped to her side and caught her wrist.

In that grasp she was helpless to resist or flee; the only chance left was to

use her lungs for what they were worth, and trust to rescue coming. After the strange way he had approached her she was certain he was not a safe companion.

But Pete read her intention.

"Don't yer dar' to!" he said, pointing at her one pudgy finger.

"I've told yer I'm wun ov Bulger's men; now, I'll tell yer suthin' else. I war out ter ther major's, an' I'm a takin' a hull hand in that pie. Crowd me an' I'll tell ther f'ust man ez comes a few facts thet ain't bin got onter yit. Mebbe ther crowd knows how yer left thar, an' mebbe they don't, but ef they did, p'raps they'd git onto s'uthin' else."

Ida's face grew whiter, and there was something of a hunted look in her eyes. She tried to draw herself up indignantly, but Pete laughed harshly.

"I'll make a fair offer. You show me back by ther route yer kim over, an' ef I git my pard out all straight I'll let yer go this time. Ef not, back yer go ter Right Bower, an' I tells my story."

"Your threat is nothing to me," she answered, trying to gain courage, but shrinking in spite of herself. "I did not care for the town to know of the unpleasant adventures I have had. If we come to any bargain at all, it is that you may keep silent in regard to them. If you are really what you claim to be I would be only too glad to tell you all I know about the outlaws. If it can be done in safety I would not even object to take the return trip. But how shall I be assured you will not leave me to fall into their hands in case we are discovered?"

"That's hearty. You an' me kin work on ther same level, an' no mistake."

"Perhaps; but though I can show you the spot, and explain all the intricacies of the interior, I must insist that it be from a point of vantage where we will be in little danger. I do not propose to throw myself into the power of those fiends, even for the benefit of a member of the Bulger Detective Agency. Remember that. And unless you proceed with due caution I promise you I will leave without warning."

"That's all right. When ett kims to ther perfesh you'll find me right on the spot. What I don't know 'bout trackin' road-agents ain't in ther books; an' ef thar's a man in ther hull wide world ez Bulger trusts ter boss a clean round-up ett's jest Posy Pete, ther Sunflower Sport. Now, less us be movin', an' more power to yer trotters. We must be gittin' thar afore night kims down."

The seeming readiness with which Miss Munson fell in with his demands did not deceive the posy sport.

Though apparently paying but little attention to his companion, and a great deal to the route over which she led him, he was constantly on the alert. Had she made an effort to break away he would at any moment have been ready to prevent it.

He was also conscious she was studying him carefully whenever she could obtain a view of his face without making her intention too apparent.

It was hard lines on the young lady—this return trip, and under other circumstances might have broken her strength, but she went on without giving any tokens of exhaustion until they reached the vicinity of the gorge, which she had described to Pete beforehand.

Here their caution was redoubled, and after looking over the ground from a convenient distance, the delegate from Bulger's Agency took the lead. Soon they could hear voices, as though more than one man was near; and after a little could distinguish words that seemed more or less of anger.

Pete chuckled softly.

"They's buzzin' like mad ho'nets 'cause Posy Pete are onto 'em, an' I wouldn't wonder ef they war a takin' ett outen his pard. Ef they tries ter go too fur on that game, they'll find ther posy are around. I can't leave Hezekiah tell I know what they're goin' ter do with him."

"Go on, then, in heaven's name; but let me retire. You must be mad to drag

a woman into such a fight as may come. It may seem fun to you, but it would be death to me."

"Sorry, mum, but I cain't spare yer yit, an' yer best holt ar ter stick clost ter me. Try ter skip an' I sw'ar I'll give ther 'larm an' turn ye over ter them. Ef I cain't hold yer to ther rack one way I'll do ett another."

An angry light flashed in Miss Munson's eyes, and her hand went to her breast, but she answered nothing. The threat was not without its effect. She believed the man would keep his word, but the moment for resistance had not yet come.

They crept on. Cover was not wanting, and the voices grew nearer. At last they were within pistol-shot distance of the crowd. Words came distinctly to their ears. The lieutenant was speaking:

"If it is true, as we are almost certain, there are two things we can do, and must do. One is to jump this layout for the present; the other, to get on his trail and kill him wherever found. If we don't he will round us up in one way or another. You all know what he is, and that if he sets out to do it he will hunt us down, whether it is one at a time or all together."

"And how about the game?"

"Unless he is killed at once we must drop it for the present. It was a very neat idea; but we can't beat the cold hand that has been wrung in against us. Does it not seem so to you all?"

There was a chorus of affirmation. Then, another man spoke up:

"What are we goin' ter do with ther pris'ner? Turn him loose?"

"Never! He has had his sentence, and that is something we never change, or fail to execute. He is only a tool of the other, but his death will be a warning what he may expect when he meets us."

"Bring him out, then. There's a tree handy, and if we are going to go away from here we want to go at once. After doing that I reckon you know it means war to ther knife."

"We'll get that, anyhow," assured the lieutenant. "Bring him up!"

The men were huddled together, and their tones had been pitched on a low key. One of them hastily left the group, retiring up the gorge. Presently he returned with another outlaw, and between them marched the unfortunate Hezekiah.

"Do you repeat the same story, that you never met the man you call Posy Pete until you came to Right Bower?"

"I dew."

"And that you had not expected that meeting, and know nothing more about him than you have told?"

"Them air the fack. He air a blamed hard-lookin' case, but he air a blamed good pard tew tie tew. Ef I knowed more I'd say a heap less, an' yew ain't more'n ha'f white axin' me tew sell him out. Dew yewr w'ust, now, an' be blamed tew yew!"

As Coffin's fists were about immovable, he shook his head savagely at his interrogator, gnashing his teeth to show his anger.

At the same time a noose dropped over his head, and he was at once hurried to the tree already selected.

"Up with him!" shouted the lieutenant, and the rope began to tighten.

But, just then, from behind a rock near by, stepped Posy Pete, a frown upon his face, and a revolver in either hand.

"Say, sports, this are fun amazin', but you want ter drop ett. Han's up! You hear me?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

STEELGRIP STAYS THERE.

When the crowd carried the motion to torture information out of their prisoner, the moment of greatest danger had arrived for Tom Gregory. If he remained obstinate there was little doubt that he would die under the whip; if he confessed it was not likely that the mob, with their appetite for blood fairly whetted, would stop at that; and perhaps a double execution would be in order.

Gregory himself was utterly helpless, yet he never for a moment lost nerve. If he could not resist he could suffer. He glanced once at Steelgrip Steve, and by that time the shock was there.

The front rank of the crowd surged up on the porch, and half a dozen hands were reaching for his neck.

It was all so suddenly done that Steve had no time to decide what means could be taken to checkmate the movement. Indeed, he would rather have had the fight occur when he first took charge of the prisoner; and yet, after a fashion, he had been expecting something of this kind.

He did not hesitate now, though he acted altogether on the spur of the moment.

With one sweep of his arm he flung Gregory back through the open door, and then, with bare hands, he sprung forward, spreading out his arms and sweeping together the assailants who had gained the porch. With them in his grasp he leaped out into the heart of the crowd.

The game he played was one entirely unexpected. If Steve intended to set himself against the sentiment of the town it seemed natural that he would begin to shoot; if he resorted to physical force that he would strike out from the shoulder. He did neither; but in the course of half a minute had set up the liveliest racket that had ever been started in Right Bower.

Half a dozen men went down at the first effort, as many more were drawn into the vortex at the next. He turned them over, he tumbled them up and he tumbled them down. There seemed to be a dozen of him as he swelled around in that mob, drawing all their attention for the moment, dodging blows by the dozen, yet never striking one himself.

On the part of the crowd it was for the most part a senseless struggle. Half of those who went down were seized from behind, as they were pressing on to gain the porch, whilst others stumbled over prostrate forms, or were flung aside by their own comrades.

And just when the excitement was boiling hot, Steve slipped out of the vortex and stood with his arms folded at the farther end of the porch, whilst Faro Fantine stepped into the open door and faced them all, her eyes glowing and her cheeks flaming.

"Gents all," she exclaimed, "the Latter End is a public saloon, but all the same it is private property, and I don't intend to have it wrecked, even by a mob of my friends. Now, what is this racket?"

"Stan' aside, miss, er they'll be over yer in a minnit," said Dunk Duncan, who had kept as cool as the coolest, and was just about to slide through the door.

"Glad to see you are at the front, Dunk Duncan. You will talk reason. I want this mob to understand they can't come into the Latter End in any such shape as this. It will be the latter end for some of them indeed if they attempt it. This place is all I have in the world, and I don't mean to lose it without doing the best I can for the old shanty."

Her voice rang out clear and sharp over the crowd, and as there was no longer any one striving to keep up the confusion it had a great effect. Things quieted, whilst men tried to take stock of damage, and make out what had occurred.

Duncan was one of the cool kind himself, and he knew that the lady was renowned for saying in such emergencies even less than she meant.

"Miss, no one wants ter wreck yer saloon; but we're after ther lad ez killed Munson, an' I reckon we mean ter hev him. He went in of yer'll turn him out thar won't be harm done to yer ranch."

"Turn him out to the mercies of men like those!" she exclaimed in scorn, pointing toward the man with the quirt, who had made the motion to force a confession, and who had in some way been handled the roughest of all.

"I wouldn't give a dog into such hands. Give him a fair trial, and if he is proved guilty let him swing; but no such infernal

cruelty as that crowd meant when they made that rush."

"That's my platform, too; and I guess Right Bower'll say ther same thing when she hez time ter think. You kin trust me an' Steve an' ther men I pick out when I say he'll git a fair shake er I'll pass in. Your house shan't be hurt, I pledge yer, but you got ter let a committee in ter bring him out, er we'll hev ter make headquarters inside. Take yer choice."

"When you talk I know it's a man speaking. If he is inside you can have him if you think you can keep that pledge. And if you don't I'll call you to account."

"That goes. Steady, you howlers, I'll let it pass this time; but you try ter rustle my prisoner again tell the time comes, and we begins ter shoot. Watch the house while me an' a couple ov the boys brings him out."

Dunk's backers by this time had got together, and though the majority of the crowd may have felt the other way, those who supported his authority were very determined. Having something like justice on their side, they held the fort. Duncan and three others went into the house in search of their man.

Fantine stepped outside to allow Duncan to pass. At the same time she said:

"You won't find him in the house, I can tell you that. He went right on through, unless I am much mistaken. It was hardly worth while to explain till a little sense got hammered into their heads, but it is straight goods I am giving you."

She spoke in a low tone, but the man who had been figuring as Judge Lynch heard her plainly enough.

He did not wait to hear more, but hurried on, his men having already preceded him. If this was the truth—and Faro Fantine had never been accused of being a liar—the trouble was not all over yet, and she might have to fight for her domicile and that of the tiger. If the crowd suspected her of conniving at the escape of the man they believed guilty of murder there was no telling what they might or might not do.

Inside he looked around. Two or three men were in the saloon, all attaches of the house. Jimmy Divine, the bartender, was at his post, looking serious but firm; the others were right at the door, and appeared to be more interested in what had been going on outside than in anything on the inside.

"Where did he go?" asked Duncan, sternly, of the first man he met.

"Blamed ef I know. Some feller skipped on through, but we was lookin' at Steve a-spreadin' hisself. Ask Jimmy. He stayed right by the bug-juice, an' had a chance ter see."

The rest of the committee were already asking the question of Divine; and the answer they got was not comforting.

"As near as I can make out, gents, he went right through that window. If he didn't he must have gone up in smoke."

He pointed at the raised sash, toward which the four made a simultaneous rush.

No one was to be seen on that side of the house, but that did not count. There had been plenty of time for Tom Gregory to get out of sight if by any miracle there had been no one there to follow, or prevent. Certain it was, nothing could be seen of him in the saloon, and what more likely than that he had made his escape as Jimmy said.

Just then came a roar from the impatient crowd. In another moment, if nothing was done, it would make the effort to come surging in.

Duncan rushed to the door.

"B'lunder, boys, I b'leve he's skipped. Scatter 'round the house, an' some ov yer shin out to'rads ther hill."

Of course, there were a number who took the advice without a moment of hesitation. There were others, however, who wanted to come right in and see for themselves, and they wanted to come raging. Dunk Duncan was ready for them and growing cooler every minute.

"Go slow, now, or we'll be him. Git a guard 'round ther house so he can't get

away ef he hesn't d.d it. An' hev a move on! Easy, now, you hear me, I'll hev things did straight ef I hev ter fight fur it. When yer elected me fur Jedge Lynch yer give me ther runnin' ov it."

Backed up by half a dozen or more men in the crowd, he succeeded in bringing something like order out of the chaos which followed the announcement.

It was not to be supposed that the entire crowd could be kept out, but there was no mad rush. When the entrance was made it was in an orderly fashion, and a systematic search of the house was begun.

Miss Fantine coolly followed, offering no objection when the inmost recesses of her own apartments were invaded; and pointing out here and there places where Gregory might have been expected to be, but where he certainly was not.

The ground floor was hastily swept through, a peep under the bar and a look into several closets exhausting the possible hiding places there. Up stairs the recesses, on either side of the half story rooms were searched—these by the light of a lamp—and even the little loft above.

After that came a sweep downward to the cellar. There boxes were overturned and barrels moved, and the space carefully calculated, and accounted for.

When every possible hiding place had been explored, so far as any were found, Duncan drew a long breath.

"No use, boys, he must have got away. We'll keep a lookout around the house, but it's no good. If the men didn't catch him afore he got to ther hill, he's gone fur good. It's gittin' too dark ter foller him to-night, an' I don't reckon he'll be fool enough ter be caught ag'in hangin' round this camp. Ef he is I begins ter believe we better let ther court nonsense go an' finish him up off hand. He's too slippery fur us ter deal with on a square game."

"Ef you, an' Steelgrip, an' a few more hedn't bin so blasted purtickler we'd hev hed him all dressed up in a wooden overcoat by this time," growled one of the crowd who had been taking part in the search.

"Mebbe Steve war on ther squar', an' mebbe he war achin' ter hev justice did; but ef ett war ary other man in this camp ez tried on his game he'd a dropped in ther go-off, er this camp would a bin cordin' up ther stiff by this time."

"Whar is Steve, anyhow?" asked another.

"Lit out with the first rush for the hill. If anybody is going to get the cuss I reckon it'll be him. He don't fly off the handle first thing, but he's always at the front in the long run."

Just at this time Chet Brayson turned up, and in no good humor that the fun was all over, and there was nothing but disappointment for him to strike.

Pete Porter had been a friend of his, but just now he wanted to say something to him which was anything but friendly. He began—but never finished the first sentence.

Pete turned on him without waiting to hear his complaint.

"What did yer do with Miss Munson, blast ye?"

"Great Scott! I didn't do nothin'. She didn't keer fur company, so I just left her to come along to suit herself."

"You did?"

"I did."

"Well, then, dog blast ye, ett's ten ter one that young man hez got her ag'in. If Right Bower does the right thing she'll go out to see."

And instantly there arose a tumult of voices, and a hasty formation of plans, in which the capture of Tom Gregory was almost altogether forgotten.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STEELGRIP STRIKES A SNAG.

Of course, careful search had been made through the ruins of Major Munson's house, and, though no signs of a human skeleton had been found, that did not seem to be any reason why the body

of the Major had not been devoured by the flames.

Indeed, up to the moment when the party from Right Bower so unexpectedly met the young lady, the general opinion had been that she, too, had been calcined in the fierce heat of the burned building.

There were some, even now, who were not sure they were willing to give up that opinion, in spite of the statements of Pete Porter, Brayson, and the rest.

At any rate, there was a mystery about it which has not yet been explained.

How Gregory escaped from the lynch court was as unsolved as ever, and how he came to be in company with the young lady who had so earnestly demanded his life was a question which excited the wildest curiosity.

It seemed plain that he had confederates; but who they were was a puzzle. Up to date, there had been no depredations within several score of miles, and Captain Diamond and his band were known only by reputation.

It is true, the more wealthy and solid men of the town had not been at the front when the lynch court was organized, nor had they put in an appearance at the Latter End; but that was easily explained, since in neither case had they had time or notice to be on the spot.

On the one occasion Steelgrip Steve had been accounted for, and on the other he had been very much in evidence. Inside of the camp there was positively no one on whom a breath of suspicion had been cast; but it began to look as though more than one man had been engaged in the murder, and that there was some reason why the liberty, and perhaps the life, of Miss Ida had been menaced, beyond the mere fact of her having been a witness to the crime.

By this time night had begun to fall. Some of those who had started out at Duncan's first order were coming back sulkily to report that they had seen no trace of the fugitive. Others still held on in the chase; but, unless they made some discoveries soon, it was a pretty safe thing that, for the night at least, their prey had escaped.

For almost the first time since she opened the Latter End, Faro Fantine was not popular with Right Bower.

Angry glances were cast at the saloon, and two or three men muttered that the way to make sure was to burn the blamed thing up.

As the night advanced there would be danger of something of the kind being tried, in spite of the fact that on the one side the saloon was near enough to other buildings to endanger that section of the town.

The result was, four men were stationed on guard to watch the place, while a delegation of perhaps twice as many went back over the trail to meet the young lady who, if nothing had happened to her, should at least be near the limits of the camp.

At the edge of town they were overtaken by the Gold Sport.

Fortunately, none of the men in the party had been under his hands when the rush was made on the prisoner, or there might have been friction.

Not that Steve would have cared for that, judging by his past record, but it would have interfered with the programme, and, perhaps, made quite a difference in the way everything turned out.

He gave a general sort of greeting to every one as he came up, and then spoke to Brayson in a low tone. As yet he had no exact account of what the searchers that afternoon really had found, and he wanted to know.

Of course, he knew something of how Tom Gregory came to be in the neighborhood, and guessed more; but Ida Munson's appearance was a puzzle which he half hoped and half feared she would explain when they found her.

It was not at all likely the young lady could miss the trail when all she had to do was to follow on in the direction her friends had gone; but some anxiety was felt when minute after minute passed, and there were no signs of her.

When they came to the spot where she had been discovered, and still no traces, it was more than ever certain something had gone wrong.

Could it be possible she had become turned around, and had wandered back into the wilder and more untenanted region from which she had doubtless once made her escape?

Or, had some worse evil befallen her?

By this time it was too dark to take up the trail with any certainty; and Posy Pete had been careful to leave as little evidence of his presence as possible. There was nothing to do but to make a search by spreading over the ground, calling, and even firing pistols, though, perhaps, that was not the best thing they could have done. Steelgrip Steve took Brayson into his confidence after a fashion.

"See here, Chet; the chances are she has got off the trail, and we have passed her in the dark. She may be in camp by this time."

"Right you be; but we can't take ther risk. Better send one man back with the news, an' ef she's thar he kin come out an' tell us. Ef she ain't he'll bring half ther town back ter help ther search."

"There's some shanties further on, and she may have got to them. Some of us better try them. Three or four men are working out here, all by their lonesome selves; but I guess they are all square fellows, who would see her through."

"Somethin' in that; but it'll take another man to find out. That won't leave any too many for ther work here."

"All right; send a man back, and I'll go ahead. I know just where to find the boys, if I don't meet any of them on the way, and, good news or bad, I'll be back here in half an hour."

"Git thar, Eli, an' hump yerself along ther road. This thing begins ter look more an' more nasty."

Without further delay, Steve started off. This just suited him, and he began to believe that at Art Hughes's cabin he would be able to obtain the information which was wanted.

He dropped off the trail before going very far, and headed straight for the mysterious hermitage in the mountain side.

He knew it was possible that Brayson might change his mind, and go on to investigate at the shanties. It would then seem suspicious to learn that Steve had not been seen; but the sport trusted to being able to offer some explanation, though meantime he wasted no moments.

Sooner than he had believed it possible he reached the neighborhood of the cabin.

After that he moved more cautiously, dismounting and approaching on foot.

The appearance of Tom Gregory at the camp showed itself that something uncounted on at this place had happened, and danger to him, too, might be lurking in the air.

Everything was dark and silent about the cabin, but he found the door unfastened.

Without hesitation, he entered and struck a match, by the light of which he found the lamp. With that lighted, he took a survey of the room and then went straight to a box by the side of the fireplace, which held some pans and cups, apparently used in cooking.

Crumpled up loosely, as though cast aside as waste paper, Steve found that for which he was looking, and, smoothing it out, he read:

"Skipped by the back route. Will follow and see what's at other end. Looks as though they had come."

There was no address or signature; but Steve knew it was addressed to him and none other.

"Great ginger!" he exclaimed. "Something's happened to Ante, or he would have been here again by this time. Sure as death the gang has got back, and Art couldn't fight the crowd. Can I?"

It was rather an interesting question, and one not so easy to answer.

Instinct told him to follow at once, while the trail was comparatively warm; but it might not be so comfortable for him to give an explanation to Chet Brayson, if he was questioned as to the reason for his disappearance from the hunt for Miss Munson. And then he was not sure of the way. He came out into the open air and looked around.

His eye ranged over the mountain side, and suddenly he saw a faint spark of light, and then to his ears came a sound which proportionately seemed fainter still.

He recognized both. The flash and report of firearms were things he could not mistake; and, without another thought of Chet Brayson and the men of Right Bower, he turned toward the distant spot where he fancied another act in this little drama was being played.

In a general way he knew the route, and, as far as it was possible, he utilized his horse.

Then he turned the animal adrift, well knowing that either it would not wander far, or, in the event of his continued absence, would find its way back to the town. The rest of his journey would have to be made on foot.

Ten minutes later he came to a little pocket well up on the mountain side, with which he had some previous acquaintance.

He might have blundered straight on, had he not heard the stamp of a horse's foot.

Instantly he was on his guard. A corral up here could be for no good purpose, and he crept warily around in the darkness, bent on discovering what he could, without his own presence being found out.

This was not the exact spot where he had seen the flash from a gun, but it was near enough to let him know there was a connection between the two places.

At the farther end of the pocket he found horses, almost invisible in the gloom. More than that. Two men were there; and, as he crept near, he heard them converse in a low tone.

"Pears like they been gone a good time. If they hed struck a snag, we ought ter hev heard more noise."

"Yes; unless the boss has lit into them with a knife."

"What would our crowd bin a-doin'? Lieutenant ain't slow with the shootin' irons when there's a pinch; and ef he'd made a clean back-out he would have been around. I tell yer, this job may hev money in it, but it ain't what it war cracked up ter be."

"You are right. The boss is a good deal slowest with his guns; but then, when it does come to shootin' he's all-fired sure. If he fairly waded in with his knife he might have cleaned up the whole crowd before they got to going. And if we don't get out of here to-night, after what has been going on, we'll have Right Bower out to take a hand in. I don't like the way things look."

"A feller kin see a heap he don't like when he looks through a noose. I wish I war doin' something else."

"Hush!"

In spite of all his caution, the horses had discovered Steelgrip's presence, and several of them snorted. The guards understood something was wrong, and, with cocked pistols, peered anxiously into the darkness, naturally directing their gaze toward the spot where the animals were huddled together.

That gave Steve his chance, for he thought out the situation almost in a twinkling.

A few steps, as silent as the moving of a shadow, and he was within reach. His fist shot out twice, and the two men went down.

Then, without waiting to learn how badly they were damaged, he darted for the horses, slashed them loose, turned their heads down the mountain side, and, with a heavy stroke on the leader's flank, sent them plunging away in a mad flight.

It was swiftly and silently done, so far as his own movements were con-

cerned, but it kept him too busy to note what else was going on. As he tried to follow the runaways a whole mob seemed to fall on him, he was beaten to the ground, without being able to strike a blow or fire a shot, and just before consciousness left him he knew that he was a helpless prisoner.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANTE ART DOES THE HONORS.

When Posy Pete stepped out from his place of concealment, his revolvers in his hands, and called a halt in the business of the outlaws, he certainly created a sensation.

He had the advantages of position and readiness, while no one for a moment doubted that he was in deadly earnest in what he said.

There was utter silence.

"That seems kinder hearty," laughed Pete, as he noticed no one answered him and not an arm moved.

"Looks ez though yer means ter 'bey orders when ther boss talks. Now, you party over thar by ther pris'ner, go mighty slow, an' jest ez I tell yer. Take yer knife an' cut them ropes loose, bein' mighty keerful yer don't cut nothin' else. Ef you do I'll drop you the next minute, ef it's ther last thing I do on earth. Ef this hank can't be straightened out by a little talk somebody has got ter go up ther flume."

Though never moving himself—since he had a strong belief that one of those tubes pointed directly at his heart—the lieutenant sternly gave his counter order; and it made the outlaw hesitate, with his hand on the haft of his knife.

"Ef yer don't yer'll never lis'sen ter another warble from me, ner nobody else. Las' time ov axin'."

Pete spoke every bit as sternly, and there seemed to be the more confidence in his shooting.

The knife flashed out, cut swiftly through the cords, and then the outlaw, being already covered partially from Pete's aim by his position in Hezekiah's rear, flung himself over backward and rolled heels over head out of the lieutenant's range.

Pete had won the first point in the game, and with the moral influence thus obtained it was hard to say where his triumph would have stopped had it not been for an interruption as astounding as it was sudden.

Without warning, a figure appeared at his back, with both hands extended and rushing forward like a hurricane.

It was Ida Munson, who hurled herself against the Sunflower Sport, and, striking him full in the broad of his back with both hands, sent him stumbling forward.

He did not fall, but in the moment when his equilibrium was in danger he cut queer enough antics to have brought a hearty laugh from an uninterested spectator, had there been one.

Of course, his hands flew this way and that, and, though they never unclasped their hold from the butts of his revolvers, they held in any direction but that of the outlaws. Had the latter so chosen, they could have sent in a regular volley without the least danger to themselves.

Only one man took advantage of the situation, and that was the lieutenant.

Up flew his wrist, and he fired at the staggering Pete, who, at the shot, dropped the weapon in his right hand, braced himself for an instant, and then went reeling backward.

The young woman did not wait to see what followed her bold and almost inexplicable action, but turned at once and fled.

Perhaps it was well she did so, since the ball which tore through Pete's arm went farther, and might have torn worse.

In the excitement of the moment no one watched Hezekiah; nor did they hear the low smashing sound which followed as he wheeled and, swinging his bony fist high above his head, brought it down like a hammer upon the head of the second guard, flattening him straight to the ground, where he lay quivering slightly.

Like a flash, Coffin snatched up his revolver and thrust it into the waistband of his pantaloons; then whirled the body up over his back, spine to spine, and darted forward at as rapid a rate as his long legs could carry him. He meant to stand by his partner in more senses than one.

Nevertheless, the deadlock having been broken by the action of Miss Munson and the shot of the outlaw lieutenant, it would have gone hard with the two had it not been for another recurrence of the unexpected.

Having gone thus far, the road-agents were of the opinion that it was absolutely necessary to complete the job and utterly wipe out these prisoners who had been defying them. They would perhaps have succeeded in doing it during the moments when Posy Pete was all abroad through the wound in his arm; but, as weapons came out and a shout was raised, an answering shout in their rear and the hum and hiss of bullets renewed the panic from which they had not yet fully recovered.

How large the attacking force might be they did not even wait to see, but, turning to one side, dashed out from between it and the Bulger representatives in their front. In a moment they had melted from view, the lieutenant last of all, and only pausing long enough to send one last shot at Posy Pete, who seemed to be sinking to the ground.

Meantime, Hezekiah was reaching his side.

"Pete! Pete! fur the land sakes don't die neow!"

He bent over the Sunflower Sport as he spoke, and tried to raise his head from the ground.

"Dog gone ye, who's a-dyin'?" came from Pete, in an unexpected snarl.

"Ef you'd a-stayed out I might 'a' drawn 'em up clost enough ter be sure ov me left hand shootin', an' sent ther last whelp outen ther wet. Ett's too late now. Help me up. But yer might hev saved a heap ov trouble in ther nigh future."

"How wuz I ter know yew wuz playin' possum?" asked Hezekiah, as he twisted his arm around the pudgy figure and helped it to rise.

"Air yew hurt at all?"

"Right arm gone all ter blazes; an' ther w'ust ov it is, they knows ett. Guess we got ter skip."

"Wich way, then?"

"This way," exclaimed a stranger, who appeared at their sides.

"There is nothing to be made by waiting here, and there is only one route by which we can fall back in safety. If I hadn't stirred them up from behind I suspect you both would have been over the range by this time. I can put you where we can hold them off till dark, if they try to come again, and then we'll see what help we can get from Right Bower. There seems to be a woman in the case; but bless me if I can understand just how she comes into it."

The speaker was Arthur Hughes—Ante Art—and he pointed up the very gorge which led to the mouth of the cave from which Ida Munson had not long before made her escape.

"Stranger, yer a trump. Jest tie me up a bit, an' I'm your'n ter foller, though I'd like ter git onto whar that scratch-cat are got to. Ter treat me thet way, an' me her best friend, jest riles a feller ter bed-rock; but she's a woman, an' ef she needs us ett ain't prezackly the thing ter throw off on ther trail."

"I suspect the lady would prefer their company to yours, and after the way she has shown her hand you had better let her go. If you think we ought to act as guardians we can attend to the matter later on. For the present she's safer than we are."

While Ante spoke he was fixing on the wounded arm a bandage, which was good enough for temporary purposes at least, as it stopped the flow of blood to a great extent.

Hezekiah looked on anxiously, giving a sigh of relief when he saw the job complete.

"Neow, let's be movin'," he said, addressing his partner.

"Ez Pete goes so goes Hezekiah; but I'm aenmost ready tew admit that the funder we git away from here the better it will suit me."

"Two ag'inst one kerries ett. Lead on."

"All right. Let me take yewr arm. Yew ain't so strong ez yew orter be, an', ef ett does ary good, lean yewr hull heft on me. I'm willin'."

The offer was not unwillingly accepted, for, to tell the truth, Pete had received a shock from which he could not at once recover, and only strong nerves kept him up under it at all.

It was lucky for them that they hesitated no longer. Scarcely had they moved from the spot where they had been standing when the outlaws made their appearance again, and in a little more they would have been cut off from the line of retreat which they wished to follow.

They came warily, but Pete appeared to have eyes in the back of his head. Suddenly he shook loose from the arm of his partner, wrenched out his revolver and fired a snapshot over his shoulder, which was followed by a cry of pain.

He had barked the first man to come into sight, without ever halting or seeming to take aim.

"Ther ole man ain't prezackly a slouch with ther tools," he grinned, "an' them fellers knows ett. They won't git quite so fur for'rads ag'in. I'd a held straight-er, but ett's ther boss I'm after. Wot's ther use ov layin' sich pore cusses cold? Thar ain't no reeward on 'em nohow."

"Hello! Are you in the detective line?" exclaimed the stranger, considerably impressed by the coolness of the wounded man and his remarkable skill with firearms.

"One ov Bulger's best, not sayin' nothin' ov pard hyer, who are 'bout ez good ez they make 'em."

"Bulger's stuff don't generally turn out a high grade ore; and I swear you're the first men that ever gave me any respect for the establishment. I don't know how you are on the trail; but I'll swear you have nerve enough for the trade; and when you nosed this place out you did more than a good many failed to do. Better stop this chinning. I think we got them all behind us, but there is no telling what we may meet in this elegant retreat."

"Jest so they don't count more ner half a dozen, I don't keer who we meet; an' ef Capt'n Diamund are at ther head ov 'em I'd really shout. But, stranger, how did yer kim ter git on ter ther curleycues hyer? Sure you ain't bin standin' in with ther gang?"

They had entered the cave proper by this time, and Hughes laughed as he answered the question he could not help but think was natural.

"Not very much, I haven't. The fact is, I bought out a claim, and the fellow threw in a shanty with it, though the two lots are a mile apart. The cabin sits right at the other end of this hole; and I've been watching for a month, without ever an idea that I was likely to have such neighbors. They just turned up; and I guess they didn't know any more about me than I did about them. I found they had made a visit in my absence, and struck in to explore. It was all sheer luck I turned up when I did, and it was only because I chipped in on the weakest side that I knew which one to take."

During all this conversation Hezekiah remained remarkably quiet, for him at least. He followed willingly enough, and yet he was not altogether certain that he wanted to trust this stranger too far, who hurried them along as though he did not want them to stop to examine the different sections of the cave.

They reached the little passage at the farther end without accident, and Ante halted before the door which he had closed behind him when entering on his explorations.

It was closed still. Indeed, it was more than closed. Something had been done to

it since he left it, and, though he wrestled with it after a fashion which he believed must make it open, it obstinately refused to move. He was not sure, but he even suspected it had been made more solid in some way; and, as it had been originally made to keep such people as he out, now it seemed to be arranged to keep them in. While he pushed and worked, they heard footsteps coming through the darkness which lay behind them.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

"Ef I warn't all broke up," whispered Pete, "I'd show yer how ther thing orter be did. Bein' ez I'm jest a wreck, you'll hev ter run things. Put out yer light an' lay low. Ef yer gits Billy, save him; he's my meat."

"Who's Billy?" asked Ante Art, as he turned down the lantern he had carried, and the three huddled up closer in the gloom.

"I furgot. You ain't up ter sich things, not bein' a 'tective. Billy are ther son ov a gun ez give me this love tap on ther arm, an' ther boss ov ther gang when Diamund ain't in front. Mebbe that's him now."

"An' mebbe it tain't. Ef that's yewr Billy he hez his dancin' shoes on, and steps like a feather."

Ante Art held up his hand.

"You are right. Unless I am much mistaken it is the young lady. Had we not better call to her softly? She served us a nasty trick, but I suspect she had a little something to avenge; and as a woman she should receive forgiveness."

"Woman, nothin'," huskily retorted Pete.

"She's a tiger cat from ther jungle, an' ef she foun' us out she'd sooner send ther hull gang in on us an' see us die rejoicin' than let us help her out ov ther drag. Keep yer ears open an' lissen' whar she goes to."

The supposition was no mistake, since the lurker was Ida Munson.

When a sudden desire to rid herself of the man who seemed more of captor than a rescuer led her to do that, which had almost proven fatal to the sunflower sport, she had not intended to linger an instant near the spot.

Unfortunately, when she had run a few yards, and was congratulating herself that she was out of sight and would be able to make good her escape, she tripped and fell headlong.

No bones were broken, but the breath was fairly knocked out of her body, and for a longer time than she imagined she lay motionless. As her wits returned from their temporary wool gathering she gathered herself up, and peered around after the cautious manner of the beast to which Posy Pete had likened her.

In the interval much seemed to have happened; and the relative position of things had changed.

She heard the shot the lieutenant fired at Posy Pete on departing, and discovered she had so far been flanked that while the outlaws held their present position there was but one way open for her to follow, and that was the one by which the three men were leaving.

In spite of the horror which Posy Pete had inspired in her, she would have chosen to take her chances with the three had it not been for the mad act of a short time before.

Now, it seemed to her but a toss-up which party would give her the better treatment, and her best hope seemed in avoiding them both.

That was easier thought than done.

Ante Art had led away his companions, but the outlaws did not mean to withdraw.

In a few minutes they recovered from their panic, and quietly arranged plans.

It seemed possible that the three might have some idea of escaping by the route over which Posy Pete had approached, and the whole force was deployed so as to render this impossible. Then, it came sweeping along; and if Ida Munson retained her present position she must infallibly be discovered.

She was not ready for that, and raising herself into a stooping posture, swiftly scurried along, though knowing well enough the movement would take her back into the cave, and perhaps into the arms of the man who had so much reason to hate her.

Cautiously as she moved, she did not succeed in escaping observation.

A low shout from one of the men told her she had been discovered, and almost immediately after there came a shot, though the bullet hissed a yard or two above her head.

That was too near for comfort, but if she had only known, had it sped according to its aim, it would have come a great deal nearer.

Fortunately for her, the lieutenant struck the hand of the marksman just in time to spoil the shot. Then, with a cry, he darted forward, thinking to catch the fugitive without much trouble.

He made no allowance for the fact that Ida was fleet as a mountain deer, and that the shot had added terror to her speed.

The men in front were forgotten. She thought only of escaping those in her rear. Away she sped, and again entered the cave, a dozen yards ahead of her pursuers.

When she saw the light of the lantern ahead she did not hesitate, but followed on, and thus was able to pass in safety the obstructions and danger spots in the way. She might have halted, and hidden in the darkness, but she heard the footsteps which followed, and was well aware these men knew the recesses of the cave far better than she. There was little hope of finding a spot for concealment which they would not discover.

Her only hope was to lead them on to a collision. Then, if she could dodge the flying bullets, she might hope to conceal herself and perhaps be forgotten.

When the light disappeared it was not hard to guess her presence had been discovered, and now it was possible search would be made for her from that side also. Unless she was willing to make a choice, and throw herself into the hands of one party or the other, the task before her seemed doubled.

As she heard the steps behind coming nearer it was but natural she should edge farther forward, taking her direction as well as she could from where she supposed she had last seen the light. It was not likely that the three would turn again; and, indeed, she began to think they had passed from view through some opening. She was not prepared for a low whisper that sounded almost at her ear:

"If you want to give them the slip come straight forward and you will find friends who will stand by you to the last."

Ante Art had found the way to press back the spring holding the hidden door, and though the way was now open, he could not think of abandoning a woman if she had need of his help. As yet he had not recognized who she was, since Ida Munson was to him an utter stranger. Had he known she was the niece of the late mine-owner he would have been more than ever set in his purpose, from which the others did not attempt to dissuade him when he glided back.

She wanted no such aid as she could find there. All she desired was to be let alone; to be allowed to take her departure in her own time and way. At this offer she felt more alarm than pleasure, and answering never a word, turned and noiselessly glided away.

Hughes, listening closely, heard the light pit-a-pat of her feet, and knew it was folly to wait longer, since she refused his assistance.

He did wait, however, and a moment later it seemed to him he heard a low cry—perhaps a slight, scrambling noise. Had he been even as well posted as Tom Gregory he might have suspected what had happened; but when there still came no answer to his proposal he hurried back to his companions, and, entering his cabin, closed the door.

He took a wrinkle from what he had

fancied, and fastened it so that it would be impossible to open it from within without bringing something like a battering ram to play upon it. He forgot, just then, the note he had left for Steel-grip Steve, or he would either have destroyed it altogether, or added something to it, telling of what he had found.

"Here we are, boys," he said, as he opened a box which served as a cupboard.

"It's about that time now, and there's bread and cold meat without end. You can eat with one hand and hold ready for the gang with the other. After we have had a bite I reckon we had better report at Right Bower."

"Yew kin," said Hezekiah, falling to, nevertheless, with a good appetite; "but when Pete an' me strikes a clue we work it fur what it's w'uth. We ain't got tew the bottom ov things, an' I calkerlate we'll stay with 'em till we hev."

"Old man, the best thing you can do is to get to town as soon as you can, and nurse up that arm of yours. You're not in exactly the best sort of condition, and though I can't swear there are any badly broken bones, there's a chance for blood poison to set in, and if it does you'll go over ther range a-kitting."

"Thankee, pard, but that's got ter keep tell this leetle hand are played out. My pard hez hold ov ther right end ov ther string. We ain't come ter Right Bower fur our health, but ter rake in ten thousand shekels, money ov the 'Gyptshuns, ez are offered fur ther pusson ov Cap. Diamund."

"But, blast it, can't you see that Diamund is not here; and it is uncertain, even, whether this is his gang? I don't want to see you die in your sins."

"Whar ther gang is Diamund ain't fur off, an' I'm goin' out ter look fur 'em ag'in. Yer wouldn't hev me leve b'uty in deestress, nohow, would yer? Thar's a leddy in ther case, moreover."

"She don't seem to want your aid, and is no doubt a member of the gang."

"On yer life she ain't. She's ther mut-ton, right now, an' sne'd give another ten thousand ef she war safe outen ther clutches. You go tell Right Bower Miss Munson's out hyer, in ther hands ov ther outlaws. Coffin an' me'll see they don't git away with her; and we kin hev ther round-up in ther mornin'. Git a move on ef yer goin', fur me an' Hezerkiah ain't wastin' no more time hyer."

Pete spoke with sudden firmness, as though he had just made out the plan of his campaign, and took a step with more than his old-time firmness.

"But if they come out here at the cabin, who is to watch them?"

"They ain't comin' out hyer. They're makin' reddy ter skoot, an' ther cherlots an' horsemen don't go by this trail, not in ther outstart, nohow. When they git ter goin' Pete'll be thar. So long."

The two went on together, leaving Ante puzzled, yet more than half convinced.

"If Steve was only here he could tell better what to do, and I guess the bes' plan is to bring him. If there is any truth about that girl being Munson's niece, it's the right thing to do. I'll try it, anyhow. Night is coming on, and the sooner I strike him the better."

In haste, Ante started for a short cut to the town, leaving the two men from Bulger's agency to keep on the track of the road-agents.

Posy Pete's arm was in a sling, and he moved along with fair strength and speed, but Hezekiah was not altogether satisfied.

"Yew sure yewr arm's all right?" he asked, as he saw his partner give a suspicious lurch.

"Ett wouldn't be w'uth much in a riot, an' that's a fack, pardner, but Pete hisself is all hyer, an' he'll stay. I'll do ther headwork, an' you kin take double sheer ov ther fightin'."

"Mout hev bin a good plan ter hev brung him along?" suggested Coffin, with a twist of his thumb over his shoulder.

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. No unless yer wanted ter make a divy. Ef I'm not away off he are in ther same line, an'

that's why he's down on Bulger. Now, save yer breath. We got a long road ter travel, an' not much air ter spend."

Hezekiah had reason to believe Pete told the truth before the advancing night had even fairly settled around them.

Also, to admire the nerve of the man who marched gamely on in spite of the wound, which would have laid many a man on his back. Fortunate it was that Ante Art was no mean surgeon, and had done his work of bandaging well.

They traveled some miles to cover the ground they had avoided in a few hundred yards of the cave, but they flanked the outlaws by the operation, and in the darkness almost stumbled upon a detachment of them huddled together, conversing in low tones.

Nothing connected could be heard, but enough was made out for the two to understand Ida Munson had not fallen into their hands, but that it was believed she was somewhere in the cave, where a search was still continued. Pete gave his partner a touch, and they backed cautiously away to a safer distance.

"Ett ain't wu'th while ter cut loose on sich cattle ez those er I'd go fur layin' 'em out. But we orter know what ther plan are, an' mebbe we kin find out. Looks ez though ther hull gang hed got inter ther ring, an' when they all comes tergeth'er thar'll be too many ov 'em fur us two ter fight, good men ez we be. But when ther gang all kims, Diamund'll kim with 'em; an' Diamund are our meat. Lay low, an' say nothin'."

Pete had hardly ceased speaking when the chance he was looking for occurred. One of the men left the main body, and started in the direction of the cave.

At once the two fell in on his trail, and coming between him and his comrades, they might not have aroused his suspicion, even if the outlaw had noted their presence.

But he knew nothing of them until Hezekiah, with a great spring, reached his back, and swiftly throwing out his own arms pinioned those of the outlaw to his side. At the same time Posy thrust out his left hand, with the intention of shutting off any cry the captive might try to make.

On one thing they did not count.

In his hand the outlaw carried a revolver, loaded and cocked, and with a swift movement of the wrist he thrust the muzzle upward, full at Pete's face, and fired.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HEZEKIAH HOLDS THE FORT.

That shot was the one which had attracted the attention of Steelgrip Steve, and it caused the utter failure of the attack.

Pete staggered back unhurt, but he knew that the game was up, even without a shout which arose. It would not have been too dark for the outlaws who were already hastening in that direction, to have discovered the outlines of his form, but that momentary flare had illuminated his face, and it had been recognized.

At the same time, almost, he heard the voice of the lieutenant, rising in harsh command.

"On your lives, don't let him get away!"

Posy Pete accepted the situation, and gave the order in a twinkling:

"Thar's too many ov 'em fur us, Hezzy dear, an' me with a broke arm. Skip!"

Coffin was of the same opinion. He had already felled the prisoner with a stroke of one of his pile-drivers, and without even firing a shot the two went crashing back into the darker shadows which lay back into the darker shadows beyond.

It was necessary to seek concealment; and if that could not be attained, to reach a place from which a defense could be made to better advantage.

They had the advantage of the surprise, however, for it took a minute or two to arrange the pursuit, and though one or two had started out without waiting farther orders, they went off on a tangent from the true course, since almost immediately the two changed their route.

For perhaps ten minutes the fugitives kept on in their retreat, though after the first burst they advanced more leisurely, since there seemed no immediate danger.

By that time the ascending grade had begun to tell on them both, and the sunflower sport threw himself down, at length, a little carefully, to be sure, but doggedly.

"Blamed ef I go another rod tell sumbody sez highspy. Ef we hed any sabbe we'd a stopped half way back. This hyer runnin' away 'thout leavin' a tally behind makes me weak. Ef that blasted fool hed hev kept his shootin' iron still we could a offered him terms ez would hev arranged ther hull bizziness."

"This detectiv' work air prodijus excitin', but it 'pears tew go slow. To tell the trewth, I don't seem to be no nearer tew Capt'n Diamund than when I started."

Hezekiah answered in a discouraged tone, which had the effect of waking Pete up.

"Thar's jest whar yer mistooked. Things are a pannin' out about right, an' Diamund ain't fur off. I wouldn't wonder ef you war ter lay yer han's on him afore mornin'. He's right whar I want him, an' don't you furgit ett. Ef he was with the gang yer couldn't take him out, could yer? But when he's browsin' 'round ther outskirts, all ett wants are a bit ov luck, an' we rakes in him an' ther ten thousand dukats."

"So it should be, but luck don't seem tew be comin' my way."

"Wait long enough, an' ett'll shorely arrove. Ef we kin git hold ov wun ov them agents we'll get ther hull racket out ov him. Rest up a bit, an' we'll go down an' try 'em another whirl."

After that they remained silent for quite a while.

Now and then they heard something of the outlaws in the distance, but fortune at least had befriended them in the selection of a hiding-place, where they could remain unmolested, until the gang had again settled down.

The inaction was all right for Pete, who drew his coat up around his ears, and took things as they came. Even he could feel that tortured nature sometimes demanded a rest.

Hezekiah was not feeling the same way. When the outlaws ceased to hunt him he was ready to hunt them. The indignities he had received kept him to the trail almost as much as the hope of reward, and after a time he proposed that he drop down the slope a little and see if he could learn anything of what was going on.

His partner offered no objections, and he cautiously withdrew.

He was gone for what might have seemed a long time had not Pete dropped into a doze, but when he returned he was brimming over with news.

"Sorry tew say it, pardner, but we'll hev to git a move on. I seen him with my own eyes, and ef what I heard air tew be b'lieved they 'air goin' tew skip over the mountains at daybreak."

"Seen who?" growled Pete, whose wits for the moment were not altogether about him.

"Capt'n Diamund."

"You say. How d'yer know him?"

"Oh, I hev hed my 'spici'ns, an' when I seed him there I know'd to wunst."

"Seen who, blast ett?"

"Ther chap they calls Steelgrip Steve. Didn't I told ye so, back there in teown?"

"Eh? Well, I'll be ding-blasted!" muttered Pete, as if thoroughly bewildered by the intelligence.

"An' ef I didn't think he war jest ther squarest kind ov a sport! I'll never ag'in b'lieve in a man more ner I know."

"I ain't keerin' fur that; but I'm thinkin' what a mighty good man it'll take tew han'le him. Yew an' me hez a contrack, an' no mistake. Dew yew think we air able fur him?"

"I reckon we'd be able fur him ef we kin git away with ther gang. But, Hezzy, dear, don't ett kinder strike yer thet jest now ett's them ez are a huntin' us. Somehow they got right down onter us, an'

they know ef they don't git away with our luggage, we'll git away with their'n. Kin we fight 'em all? Ef Diamund hez j'ined 'em ther next move 'll be ter run us down. He ain't ov ther foolin' kind, mussin' 'round with ropes, an' all that. He jest shoots plum center, an' lets ther corpus lay."

"Wael, ef yew air weakenin' on it, say so, an' I'll hunt 'round fur a man."

"Me weaken? Blast yer, I war jest tryin' ter find out ef you war game ter stay in ther ring when ther pinch come. Ther reeward are about ther same, dead er alive. We kin hang 'round an' pick him off ef we can't do no better. How's that fur a scheme?"

"Ett air not what I would choose, but when Hezekiah Coffin goes eout in battle array he is eout tew stay."

"Good ez wheat, gi'mme yer hand fur thirty days. Bulger hez two men on this trail, an' don't yer furgit ett."

"I ain't likely tew, an' them ez kin reecomember this day will be apt tew say the same thing. It 'pears tew me, however, that I hear a sound in the distance. Be they comin' this way at last?"

"Blamed ef ett don't sound that way," whispered Pete, as he cocked up his ear to listen.

"We better fire an' fall back. An' mebbe ther firin' hed better be laid over a weenty bit tell we see where we are at. Gi'mme yer arm, pard. I'm stiff ez a stage hoss."

It did seem as though Hezekiah would have enough to do taking care of his partner, and helping him over the rough places, without troubling himself over the capture of Captain Diamund. The wound was at last getting in its work, though perhaps it might not be so bad when he got warmed up.

They fell back before the advance, which, at times, they could hear cautiously pushing its way along.

It even began to look as though Pete's nerve was breaking a little, for, as the sounds of advancing footsteps was more clearly to be heard, he clutched Hezekiah's arm more tightly with his sound hand, and earnestly asked:

"You won't throw off on me, pard? Ett's me, Posy Pete, ther Sunflower Sport, they're after. They know when I git inter ther 'tective line I'll make a haul er bu'st a wheel. They've heared ov me afore."

"I'll stay with yew, pardner, till the keows tails drap, an' that's gospel trewth. Ef yew kin find kiver, take it, and I'll stand them off."

"Not yit, but ett may have ter be done. I'm growin' awful weak."

Hezekiah began to look around with some anxiety.

As well as he could make out the lay of the land it looked as though they had struck a trail which it was not easy to leave. They were up on the summit now, and he began to see they had drifted into a narrow, natural roadway.

With his companion in his present condition it would be unsafe to attempt to descend on either side, while there was no telling what obstructions they might meet with farther on.

He was almost a novice at this kind of work, but at last he had plenty of courage. If he was retreating at all it was because he had some consideration for his wounded companion; and in the last five minutes began to comprehend that the man of the posy was fitter for a hospital than for a fight with outlaws on the mountain top.

His resolution was taken.

"Pete, this air tew hard on yew. We'll hev to git off'n this ro'ote, an' it ain't so easy tew find the way with them a crowdin' us hard. Yew go ahead an' find a jumpin' off place, an' I'll hold 'em right hyer. May ez well hev it eout neow."

"Yer white ez they make 'em, pard, an' ef I hed all two both han's I'd say you'd go an' I'd stay. I could hold this place ag'in three gangs; mebbe you kin ag'in one. Don't shute tell yer hev to, an' mebbe yer better s'render ef yer gits cornered. Ez I s'ed afore, ett's me they're after; an' they'll play mighty light with

Posy Pete's pard tell they git Posy hisself in ther box. So long, an' I say ett ag'in. Yer white."

Pete held out his hand as he spoke, and Hezekiah clasped it. It was the left hand, to be sure, but that was better than none. Then Pete toiled wearily away, whilst Hezekiah dropped down and prepared to defend the narrow trail against the advancing force, which was still silent, but perilously near.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION.

The force appearing so inopportunistically for Steelgrip Steve was the body of outlaws which had been in pursuit of the two men from Bulger's Agency.

They had moved cautiously, covered over a large scope of ground, as it seemed to them, and, having been unable to find trace of the men, had given up the search for the present, turning their attention to the other necessities of the occasion.

The cavern had already been thoroughly searched, not even excepting the rift into which, the day before, Tom Gregory had fallen.

There was absolutely not a single sign to indicate that the young lady had been there, and they began to think perhaps there had been a mistake.

At any rate, she had disappeared, and, it was more than likely, was with those who would take advantage of the information she could give.

If they were not ready to stand a siege from all of Right Bower, it would be well to make themselves absent before another morning dawned.

They might have remained there a year under ordinary circumstances, and, even if their presence had been suspected, the citizens would not have cared to interfere. But when they became mixed up in murder and abduction, it was a different thing, and there were plenty of men who would hound them to the death.

So it happened that when they came creeping cautiously back, keeping a close watch, since it was possible they had passed the two in the dark, and still might find them lurking around, they came upon Steelgrip Steve, just when he had succeeded in stampeding their horses.

It did not seem likely he had come out there alone, and, indeed, knowing that a delegation from town had caught sight of Miss Munson, they had been expecting it would reappear. That they had not heard of Chet Brayson's return was because the scouts watching him were waiting until he advanced beyond the neighborhood where he had left Ida; and they knew nothing of Steve's lonely mission.

Of course, the outlaws did not intend to lose their horses without an effort to regain them, and, while some remained to pay attention to their captive, others went straight on, in the line taken by the flying caballada.

What they learned in a short time can be described briefly.

The horses rushing madly down were met by a body of men, consisting of the original detachment from Right Bower, augmented by a reinforcement lately arrived.

These men were shrewd enough to take in the situation without hesitation or question, and, allowing the animals to dash through their lines, the main body closed up again, while a small detachment drove them straight on toward the town. A smoother piece of work had never been done, nor had the band of Captain Diamond ever met with a greater bit of misfortune from the time it was organized.

Unless ready to attack the town itself, a victory now would do them little good, and, without firing a shot, the outlaws fell back, upon hearing this account from the sentinel, who joined them.

There was one thing a trifle in their favor. Right Bower would know something of their strength, and would advance with caution. There would be at least time to decide on what move should next be made.

By the time they were all clustered together again, Steelgrip Steve had re-

covered his senses, and was facing the lieutenant in the moonlight.

It seemed hardly worth while to question him, but a hint or two might be obtained, and it was just then that Hezekiah, creeping and crouching near, was able to hear his answer, in the low, firm tones the down-easter recognized:

"I don't know how many there are in the party, but they mean business, and are strong enough to wipe out this outfit."

"If we gave them the chance," chuckled one of the gang.

Coffin waited to hear no more. Had he done so he might have learned that his hasty conclusions were wide of the mark, even though it would have taken pretty weighty evidence to shake his convictions.

So much was he interested in his own withdrawal that he did not hear the departure of the others, who, after a brief consultation, moved away with the prisoner in their midst.

What course was eventually to be taken with the Gold Sport had not been decided, but he was plainly on a different footing from the man of the posy and his pard. Even here he was known, by name at least, and all that had been heard of him was that he was a square, straight sport, who had made Right Bower his headquarters for some little time, and who would be apt to be near the head of a crowd from town for the sake of the fun; but there was no such reason to hate him as in the case of the detectives who had come to that region to run them down.

So, for the most part, felt the gang, and if there were others who thought somewhat differently they kept their ideas to themselves.

What to do with him was an unsolved puzzle which might soon become interesting; but for the present its consideration was suspended as the gang moved along.

Steve was prompt to catch on to this feeling, and, had it not been for two things, he might have rested comparatively easy, hoping that sooner or later he would be turned loose unharmed.

He knew the loss of the horses would be counted up against him as a crime which could hardly be forgiven, and it was rather a surprise that he had not been laid dead on the spot when taken in the very act.

There was another complication possible; but of that he did not think much until he was sure his ears had not deceived him. One thing was certain: he intended to keep both eyes open for a chance of escape.

If one presented itself no one would take advantage of it quicker, desperate though it might appear.

He could easily make out that the retreat, if so it was to be called, was being made in a way to avoid the men from Right Bower; but he was not so sure it could be successfully done, now the latter were on their guard.

Indeed, he had hopes that Ante Art would have a word or two to say about it, for he had gathered enough from the little conversation heard to cause him to believe that his friend had struck at them already and then made his escape. If that was the case he would no doubt come again.

It was when they were passing through a little gash in the mountain side that the opportunity Steve was looking for seemed to come.

Up above him he caught a glimpse of a human figure limned against the sky.

He was not certain he recognized in it a friend, but when it bent forward and cast a rope silently down he felt well assured it was not for the benefit of his captors.

Two outlaws tramped softly at his sides; another in his rear was ready to checkmate any move he might make. The latter was the more dangerous, and of him Steve thought first of all. Swiftly and suddenly he came to a right-about, and then catching a man on either side by the throat, he fairly lifted them from the ground, swung them together, and

flung them in a heap upon the third of his guards.

A side spring brought him to the rope, upon which his hands fell, and, almost before an alarm had been given, he went swarming up the bank, which was almost perpendicular.

The distance to climb was only twelve or fifteen feet, but, unaided, it would have been beyond his powers. This way, the moment he threw himself over the edge at the top he was, for the time being, safe.

As he had been suspecting, Ante Art was there, who caught him by the hand and hustled him out of danger.

At first the outlaws were too paralyzed to fairly understand what had happened; then they scarcely understood how the sudden disappearance had been effected. When they rushed to the spot they found in front of them a sheer rock, beyond their power to scale. Almost at the same moment they heard sounds not far away which told them Right Bower's army was not far away.

"Satan himself is in our luck to-night," growled the leader.

"Let him go, and the Old Boy go with him. I would have liked to even up the little account; but we have our own hides to look after. Forward!"

Steelgrip heard the sounds, also, and did not linger to keep watch on his late captors.

He and his friend turned from the spot and hastened away.

As they moved along Ante told his little story hurriedly, touching somewhat lightly on the two representatives of the Bulger concern, and explaining why he started for the town.

Perhaps interest in the narrative confused them somewhat. Before they had gone far they heard the sounds which had guided them growing fainter. Finally, they died away altogether.

"A little yelling and a few judicious pistol shots might bring them our way; but Diamond's men would be apt to come also, and it is uncertain which would arrive first. We'll just have to root around in the dark the best way we can."

Steve spoke as if he was a little uncertain whether he meant what he said; but Ante had no doubts.

"Right you are. The way Right Bower feels you want to be mighty cautious how you get it excited. They are yearning for somebody to send up a tree, and they're not caring much who he is. Let's just try and slip quietly into the gang, and then we'll be ready to shout with the rest of them. But, being almost a stranger myself, they might take a notion I was a subject for dissection if they stumbled on me in the open. If luck don't go with us we can just wagon off to the shanty and let things go as they are."

Luck did go with them, however, for, after a time of wandering, they mingled in with a dozen of Right Bower men, headed by a guide who knew the mountains, and who had made up his mind that the outlaws would attempt a retreat by the very route over which Hezekiah Coffin and his pard had unwittingly strayed.

They knew some one had preceded them, and were so anxiously pushing ahead that when Steve joined them little more notice of him was taken than enough to make sure of his identity.

Suddenly a voice shot out at them from the darkness ahead:

"Say, there, yew! Halt!"

Coming, as it did, out of apparent vacancy, and emphasized by the click of pistol locks, it was no wonder the men of Right Bower scented an ambushade, and obeyed the order.

Only one there recognized the speaker, and in the sudden flurry that followed there was room for him to come to the front.

"Don't be a fool, you there," shouted Steve.

"These are friends on the look-out for Miss Munson. Throw up your hands and come forward. You shan't be hurt."

"You can't fool one side ov me, Capt'n Diamond," was the ready response.

"I know you ez you air, and I'm hard on yewr trail. Surrender yewrself or stand the cornsequinces."

"The infernal fool has gone clean crazy, sure. Let him down a little easy, boys. The agents had him this afternoon and were going to hang him. He thinks we're more of the same lot."

Steve spoke in a lower tone to the men from Right Bower. He knew before many minutes the shooting would begin if this farce was kept up, and there were plenty of them there who could send a bullet uncomfortably close to the speaker, even though he was not to be seen.

"I know ther cuss by his v'ice," put in Brayson, his hand to his revolver.

"Ett's thet long-legged Yankee ez hed ther row with Bolly Welch, an' bums 'round with ther galoot ez calls hisself Posy Pete; but who are he? Ef he ain't wun ov ther gang ett begins ter look mighty like ett."

"Gang, nothing. He's one of the kind of chaps that joins Bulger's Agency, and thinks he's a detective. Pays ten dollars and gets a card. He is down here, as he says, on the trail of Diamond; though how he happened to hit it that he was in this quarter I can't say. Ante Art had a talk with him, and that's straight goods. You talk to him. I don't want to see the fool killed; and he may know if the gang really went this way."

"I'll talk to him; but ef he don't kim down first off I'll be mighty apt to try something else. Say, there, party, you know B frum a bull's foot. Ef yer do you orter know—"

He got no farther. Hezekiah, hearing a muttering, without understanding the gist of it, suddenly began to let drive.

Two or three shots he fired, with more energy than judgment, and then, with a yell the entire party charged his position.

CHAPTER XXIX.

POKER PAUL PLEADS HIS CASE.

Back in Right Bower the excitement cooled down perceptibly when the second delegation had left for the "front."

Nothing more was heard or seen of Tom Gregory, and it was generally supposed he had made good his escape, though they were keeping a keen lookout for him on the chance he might still be in hiding somewhere in the town.

Business at the Latter End was decidedly dull that evening, and after a game or two of draw, and a deal at faro, cards were thrown aside, and Miss Fantine, leaving the saloon in charge of her assistants, retired to her room. She was not at all certain there would not be trouble, for she could see she was not altogether forgiven, but the situation was accepted in a philosophic way, and after an interval of perhaps half an hour she strolled out into the street.

Several men were watching the house, as they had been detailed to do; but they appeared to pay no attention to her, and she went on her way unmolested. It was not an unusual thing for her to take a lonely stroll, and after the startling rebuff a few had received who had attempted to intrude upon her musings, she was always suffered to go her way apparently unnoticed.

So far as she could note, this evening was no exception to the rule.

This was perhaps as well, since, contrary to her usual custom, she had a definite point in view, and after a brief stroll, having given a swift glance around to make sure she was unobserved, Fantine slipped into a little shanty.

If Right Bower had seen the action it might have been surprised, but hardly scandalized.

Bob Errickson lived there; Robert had a wife who was above reproach. While no one knew of any intimacy between the two women, there was nothing to prevent their being acquainted.

Quietly as the young lady proprietor of the Latter End made her entrance, there was one person who saw it, who had kept his eyes on her from the moment of leaving the saloon door.

This was Paul Wayland.

Wayland had not been conspicuous in

the affair of the afternoon, and had quietly remained in town when the expedition for the relief of Ida Munson was hastily planned.

All the same, he kept himself thoroughly posted as to what was going on, and had been in or near the saloon from the time the evening exercises opened.

When Fantine glided away he was not far distant, and he followed in a way that attracted no attention from her—or any one else.

He could see there was a light within the house, but nothing more could be made out without running more risks than he cared to for the sake of a needless curiosity.

Unless he was very much mistaken he knew just why she went there, and he would not have given a dime to be behind those heavily curtained windows.

He took a station where he could command the door, and waited.

After what seemed a long time she came out, and moved away with a hasty step. Before she had gone far Poker Paul stood in front of her.

"You will have to pardon what may seem an intrusion, but the fact is, the time has arrived when we must come to terms, and you may as well understand it at once."

Fantine gave a little start on being accosted, but recognizing him at once, by an evident effort, regained her self-possession, and coldly answered:

"Still harping on the same old string. I thought I had settled that once for all."

"It never can be settled except in the way I want it. By this time I hope you have seen the error of your ways. If not, I may have the unpleasant duty of showing it to you."

"Never. I have given my answer once for all."

"And I tell you you must reconsider it."

"Must is a large word to use to me. At this late hour of my life I will hardly be apt to accept you as my driver."

"Don't consider it in such a harsh light. Simply understand that I have brought other influences to bear, sufficient to justify the change."

"Nonsense! What other influences can you have?"

"Don't compel me to use a certain kind of force. Your own safety might be considered one."

"And what has the question you have asked me to do with my safety? That sounds very like threatening; and the man who threatens me is in danger himself. Do you dare to be such a man?"

"To win you I dare be anything; though it is not I that would harm you, but Right Bower, if it once learned the truth."

"The truth as Paul Wayland knows it would have to be a lie for anybody else."

"Come! Supposing the question was answered, where young Gregory went to? Right Bower might not harm you, but how much would be left of your saloon by morning?"

"You coward, you! What have I to do with Tom Gregory?"

"Not very much, I hope; but enough to set the town raving."

"You are raving yourself."

"Supposing Right Bower knew that the man they have been howling to hang was in Bob Errickson's cabin, and that after having placed him there Faro Fantine chose the hour near midnight to visit him, what do you think would happen?"

"You jealous fool! Start such a report if you dare. If it were not for the complication I can see it would make I would shoot you dead for hinting at it."

"All the same, it is the truth. Consider what I hold in the hollow of my hand. You care nothing for the boy, I know well enough. I will even help you to get him away."

"Are you ready to shoot?" she suddenly hissed, bending toward him with her hand in her breast.

"Not at you, my dear."

"Then, stand out of my way, for I am."

She surged forward, her eyes glowing

with anger, and Wayland was wise enough to stand back. In that moment she would have killed without a qualm.

"Counts me as the dust on her shoes," he snarled, as he followed her with his eyes.

"There is a rod in store for you, my haughty lady, if you don't mend your ways. Were I to tell Right Bower I would have all the vengeance I could ask, and most likely it would force you into my arms, after all. By heavens! If she don't come to terms I believe I will try it. The worst is, about Errickson and his wife. It might be death to them. If Bob knew what I am thinking about he would be gunning for me without waiting for morning. Wonder if I could buy him over to my side?"

Paul Wayland hardly believed in the possibility of the idea, and certainly had no desire to try it. Muttering to himself he finally went away.

Nothing more could be done that night unless he wanted to lead the mob to Bob Errickson's shanty, and that, so far, had only been considered by him as a matter of last resort.

The young lady who was being wooed in such an obstinate manner swept home in no pleasant mood.

Paul Wayland was a desperate man, and though for herself, she did not fear him, there were reasons why she did not court a public explosion.

In the line of her business she had been compelled to make some strange acquaintances, and it was not singular that she had placed the poker king on a fairly friendly footing.

When at his best he had the manners of a gentleman, while his influence with some of the rougher citizens was worth having.

She had not at the outset expected anything like this; with a woman's intuition she divined it was not really his heart which was interested. The man was too much interested in dollars and cents to have much heart.

But he might have hungered after her beauty ever so much without using desperate means had he not fancied he saw the opening to a fortune in Faro Fantine. Once on the trail of gold and he could be pitiless as death.

As he had said, she knew and suspected too much about his past for his safety, now there had come to be an antagonism between them, and probably he saw how much that knowledge would militate against his chances.

"Yes, he knows he cannot win me by fair means," so ran her thoughts. "With such a stake on the board as he thinks he sees he will not hesitate to use foul. Would it not be best for me to strike first?"

She hesitated as though about to turn back and seek him again; but it was only for a moment.

"If there must be war to the death let him make the attack. After that I will fight fire with fire!"

With well felt desperate resolve she went into the house, where her coming seemed to be unobserved. A little later she had found her way to the cellar.

A door in the wall at the foot of the stairs led into a second apartment.

Opening this she raised the little lantern in her hand, and carefully peered into the room.

Near the opposite wall were ranged some barrels, and behind these, resting on the bare floor, Tom Gregory was quietly sleeping.

She stepped forward, and as the light fell upon his face he opened his eyes, looked thoughtfully at the woman bending over him, and then raised himself to a sitting posture.

In spite of the search by the committee, and the apparent impossibility of the fact, the young man was there.

"Thanks for the visit," he said in a low tone. "At the same time, unless you bring word that the mystery has been cleared up, it might be safer for you to leave me to my fate. You are not supposed to know of my presence here, and I would sooner go out to that mob and

have it hang me, than run the chance of harm coming to you through me. It was a mistake, my ever submitting to be stowed away."

"It was the only way to save your life, and knowing you to be innocent, I would run every risk. In another twenty-four hours, I believe, too, I can prove that innocence to all Right Bower."

"Not in the face of that young woman's charges, which she has repeated again, just when I had done my best to save her from what seemed to me a fate worse than death. Is she mad?"

"Mad she must be—or something worse. Nevertheless, though I think we shall win, I must admit that your life is hanging by a hair, and to throw yourself into the hands of the mob at present would be simply suicide."

"And to put you into danger from that mob for my sake would be murder."

"I do not intend to be in danger. If you hear a signal from above you must go back to your barrel, uncomfortable though the quarters may be. There is small danger of your being discovered there."

"But, cannot I leave the house tonight? It ought not to be hard to get far enough away to remove all danger from you. After that I could and would take my chances."

"You would have positively none. The house is watched by a guard, and, in addition, Paul Wayland or some of his followers, will have eyes of hate fixed on it every instant of time. Paul more than suspects. I have spoken with him tonight."

"Let him speak with me!" hotly interposed Gregory, and Pantine's face flushed as she understood the something in his tones which half revealed his secret.

"Never mind Paul for the present. Your safety must be assured. If he gets eyes on you you are lost. I would not have influence enough to hold back the crowd, and Steelgrip Steve, the man who has saved you twice, and might do it again, is out of town, searching for Miss Munson. Until he returns you must remain in hiding. Then, if there is no other chance we may smuggle you out in broad daylight, and keep you out of harm's way until the truth is developed."

"Surely, if escape is to be made, tonight would be the better time to try it."

"No. I had already made some arrangements in the line of business which could be brought into play, and if there is no failure in them you can be taken out in the ordinary course of events, and no one be any the wiser. If Paul Wayland can be kept off the track I do not fear for the rest of Right Bower. Only be patient, and leave no marks of your presence here to betray us. If there is any alarm, you know what to do—and for my sake, do it promptly."

"I shall not fail you; but I swear if there was any way to do it without involving you, I would sooner throw myself on the mercies of the mob than run the risk of bringing harm to a woman. How have you saved me at your own peril will never be forgotten."

"Think no more of that. You will be true to me by following my orders. I only tell you to be obedient and to hope for the best. At any moment there may be a development that will save you, but you must give your friends time. Now, good night. Innocence is a grand thing, but do not let it lead you to sleep too soundly to hear a warning, if it comes. Good-night."

She held out her hand, which was clasped by Gregory. Then she glided away.

CHAPTER XXX.

POSY PETE'S ROUND-UP.

In the charge that was made on Hezekiah's position, Steelgrip Steve started first of all.

He had taken in Coffin's idea at the very first, and saw the possibility of trouble for himself if his mouth was not

closed in regard to the affair at Munson's.

On the spur of the moment he had made Hezekiah his assistant in that matter, believing that it would be easy afterward to prove the innocence of young Gregory; but matters had gone on from bad to worse since then, and, though he was more than ever assured of Tom's guiltlessness, the proof was not yet to hand in the convincing shape he had hoped for.

The crowd might overlook his defense in front of the Latter End, but if it knew of his previous performance, including the journey through the underground passage, he might have on his hands a fight for life.

His own idea was to spring upon the Yankee, and while overpowering him, give him a straight statement of the lay of the land, and then a hint that the less he said about the Munsons the better until he had a chance to explain further. He even intended to make some few confidences, if necessary, which might give the long-legged representative of the Bulger force an eye-opener.

Quickly as he jumped forward, Brayson and his men were as quick; but, though two or three more shots tore at them from the darkness, they never hesitated. Their object was to get there as soon as possible, and they shot as they came.

Steve allowed the rush to pass him, and well that he did so.

Hezekiah had been snugly ensconced in a niche, and if he did some wild shooting his body had been pretty thoroughly protected. As the crowd reached the spot, however, he suddenly sprang up and forward to meet it.

Either he was half insane from excitement, or he had the one great virtue of personal courage, which every detective should have.

Notwithstanding the odds against him, he advanced to the contest with a ferocity which might have won against even reasonable odds, and would have made short work of Brayson by himself.

His arms shot out, awkwardly, to be sure, but with tremendous power, and the men of Right Bower fell before them. One after another, as they came up, caught a blow which staggered him back, or sent him headlong, and owing to his long arms it was always without Coffin receiving any punishment himself. If the assailants had been cool enough they might have taken a backward step or two and shot him to pieces, but unless they did that, or surrounded him so the attack could be simultaneous from all sides, it began to look as though Hezekiah could hold his own.

He had been taken at a disadvantage several times of late, and now went into the fight with the bottled-up viciousness of a number of hours of smoldering wrath.

It was all very magnificent; but Steve knew it could not last.

Right Bower had any quantity of dogged pluck; but, after all, the pistol was the thing most in vogue at that red-hot town, and to the pistol it soon must come. He was glad he had not been in the advance, yet it looked as though it was about his time to go in.

"Stand aside there, boys, and let me at him!" he shouted, rushing past a couple of the men who were still standing, and whose hands had just dropped to their belts.

The ebb and flow of the battle had brought them out into a patch of moonlight, though it was none too light yet for real pugilism, nor for looking at the rustle.

Still, to see Steve sailing into a riot was a thing of joy to men who had ever witnessed it before. Right Bower fell back as he darted at the Yankee with his hands well up and every nerve braced for the encounter. He had seen enough to know that Coffin was a "foeman worthy of his steel," and that he would have to play his best hand if he wanted to win.

As he came within a step or two, Heze-

kiah sprang to meet him, his arm shooting out with terrific swiftness; but Steve, ready for the movement, did not desire to give more punishment than was necessary.

With wonderful swiftness he dropped to his knees at the instant of Hezekiah's stroke, with a result that the huge fist shot above the head of the Gold Sport, who as instantly threw both hands upward and encircled the waist of the Yankee. Then he raised the man fairly from the ground, and, for reasons of his own, he rushed forward, bearing the body of his antagonist aloft, at the same time, in tones which only the Yankee could hear, gritting:

"You infernal fool, these men are from Right Bower, and are out to search for Miss Munson. Unless I can stand them off they'll hang you sure, as a road-agent. Keep your mouth shut about everything except how you came to be here, and I'll pull you through."

"Blast yew! I seed yew with the gang!" spluttered Hezekiah "Yew air my meat, if I die fur it. Ten thousand dollars reward! Help!"

Coffin was beside himself. Moreover, he was dangerous yet.

Another man would have found those bony fingers sinking into his throat, and it was well that Steve was on the alert. He suddenly released his hold, and, swaying into position, struck out.

It was a terrible blow, though it broke no bones. Hezekiah went rolling end over end, and before he had fairly settled to the ground Steve was astride of his body, and, snapping a pair of handcuffs on his wrists, he brought them together with skillful strength.

"There, you infernal idiot! Stay there till you get your wits about you. It's the only way to do with a mule like you are."

Even then Coffin was not senseless, though for a moment he lay quiet enough, only saved from being pounded into a jelly by Steelgrip, who turned and faced the crowd.

"No, no, boys; I took him, and I'll have him. I gave it to you straight about his being one of Bulger's men; and he's a little better stuff than that fake shop generally sends out. He has only done his duty as he thought he understood it. When he gets cooled down he will listen to reason, and then I'll take his own dables off, and you can fight him one at a time if you want to."

"Fight him!" echoed Brayson, spitting out a couple of loose teeth. "Who wants ter fight ther blamed edurkated triphammer? Ef you kin prove what yer say we'll give him tell ter-morrer at day-break ter leave Right Bower, an' ef he ain't gone we'll jest hang him fur quits. Sech a ravin', red-hot rooster is dangerous ter hev at large in a peaceful, law-abidin' communerty like ourn."

It was fortunate that Brayson spoke first. He was a reliable man, and about as cool as they make them. His words gave tone to the feelings of the crowd.

Steve knew the immediate danger was over, and turned to his prisoner, who was sitting up, glaring first at the handcuffs on his wrists and then at the crowd.

Even his addled head could not resist the evidence.

"Gol hang it! I believe yew wuz right, an' I bin playin' the fool. Ett wuzn't fur self, but poor Posy got it in the arm, nasty, an' I swore I'd stand 'em off tell he hed a chance tew git away. He's needin' yew bad, an' ef yew follow him quick mebbe yew kin head him off. Ef yew don't it's nigh tew ez like thar'll be a dead man in ther mountains!"

"Say that over again, and say it slow. What made you think we were the out-laws?"

Briefly Hezekiah explained how they came to come out there at all, and the way in which they had been surprised in their efforts to capture the second in command in Diamond's gang. He touched lightly on Miss Munson, because, even yet, he did not comprehend too clearly how she came to be in Posy's company, and then told how they had

been dodging the outlaws. As it had seemed impossible for them to escape if they remained together, he had attempted to hold the position while the Sunflower Sport sought a place of concealment or a way out of the quarters, which were altogether too close for a wounded man.

"And so, he left you here and went on over the ridge?" asked Steve with considerable interest.

"That's jest what."

"You can do as you choose, boys," Steve said, addressing the curious listeners, "but I have a kind of sneaking idea that the whitest thing, and the best thing to do is to follow right on. It's plain that there is a gang here, that have had hold of the young lady; and though I don't see how it was worked, I have an idea they have her again. If we hustle for it, we may head them off."

"Tew say nothin' ov my partner," interjected Hezekiah.

"The less you say about him the better it may turn out to be," retorted Steve shortly. "It begins to strike me that when he tells his little story along a chalk mark of truth you may learn a thing or two about the kind of men who carry Bulger's cards."

A brief consultation developed the fact that there was still a chance to intercept the outlaws if they should retreat toward the south, as was most likely, so it was decided to follow on in the course taken by Posy Pete. Several men were acquainted with the lay of the land beyond, and they moved with rapid certainty, until, at length, they heard the crash of firearms, and the sound of voices not far away.

Before long they looked down into a narrow pass into which the slanting moonbeams darted, and revealed a huddled body of men.

"Hello, thar, you men ov Right Bower, be yer thar?"

From across the pass came the response in the voice of Posy Pete!

"You bet we be! What yer doin' thar?"

"Roundin' up Capt'n Diamund's gang. Blast 'em, they went back on me, an' I'm a-playin' ter git even. You'll find 'em all thar, 'live an' kickin', 'cept Fust Lieutenant Billy Burke, an' ef I know whar my lead goes, he's cold meat. Sail in ef yer wants 'em. They can't get by hyer wile I'm a-holdin' this eend. They wouldn't reach me ef they could."

"Nor could we, either," muttered Steelgrip Steve, looking thoughtfully across the narrow defile, in which Posy Pete held his round-up; but Chet Brayson, not altogether satisfied with the appearance of things, called back:

"That's all right. Wet got 'em whar we want 'em; but, who be you?"

"Oh, I'm Capt'n Diamund, hisself. These cursed whelps went back on me a while back, an' I follered 'em ter Right Bower ter git even. So long! Give my luv ter Hezzy, dear, an' when he gits his breath ag'in he kin try me another whirl. Thar's still ten thousand reeward, an' I'd ez soon he'd hev ett ez another man."

With a mocking laugh he waved the one sound arm, in the hand of which he held a pistol, and then vanished from sight.

That was the last seen of Posy Pete, the great Sunflower Sport—at Right Bower at least.

CHAPTER XXXI.

POKER PAUL PLAYS HIS BIG HAND.

In all respects the announcements of Posy Pete were true.

The men down there in the defile were the remnants of the Captain Diamond gang, and Billy Burke would never deal another brace game of faro, nor rob a coach. His body was found where he had dropped when the men of Right Bower reached the spot, but the greater part of the men recovered from their panic when Pete withdrew from his commanding position above, and made their escape.

A few lesser villains were made prisoners, and their confessions substantiated the truth of what at first some were for

taking as a gigantic bluff from the sport of the sunflower.

It seemed the gang had left their deposed leader for dead, and when they heard he was alive and probably on the trail they dreaded his vengeance, and made an effort to inveigle him into their hands. They were not sure of him, in his disguise, however, or they would never have waited to open fire upon him and his companion at the lone rock on the Wingdam trail.

"Gosh hang it, I don't believe it!" asseverated Hezekiah, when he heard the story.

"Didn't he show me a keard frum Bulger, same ez I hed; an' didn't he lay it all out about sheerin' ther reeward? I'll bet he's a-workin' roots on us, an' goin' fur that ten thousand all by his self alone."

That view did not strike any one else, and as they marched Coffin in along with the outlaw prisoners, he had his own affairs to think about, although it was reasonably certain they would turn him loose in the morning, under sentence of exile.

The prisoners could tell nothing definite of the whereabouts of Miss Munson—which, after all, was the matter of primary interest to the little army.

She had been lost in the cave, to which they had followed her, and whether she was lurking there yet, or had made good her escape to the outside world, were questions they could only answer by guess.

It was a matter of doubt whether, at this late hour, anything could be done to find her before daylight. It seemed hardly worth while to search the cave since the men who were acquainted with it had failed to find her in its recesses. Some expressed their intention of remaining in the neighborhood of where she had last been seen, and do what they could, but others decided to return to Right Bower, in which direction they were inclined to believe the young lady had made her way.

There was a faint hope they might encounter her on the road, and a fainter one still that they might find her when they reached the town.

Ante Art had kept in the background as much as possible, but as the little army retraced its steps he and Steve swung together, and, in a low tone, Hughes confided an opinion:

"We missed the boss of the outfit, and that's a fact. Nervy rascal, wasn't he? But I have hopes the young lady is not altogether missing. There is a chance they haven't thought of."

"Out with it, then. There may be a life or two depending on finding her."

"I went through that confounded cave pretty thoroughly, and there is something that I decided might be an outlet, though I didn't risk trying it. If she dropped into that, she's either dead, and as good as buried; or there is a chance for her to come out down by the river if she could keep up her nerve. Shall we ask the crowd into the examination, or shall we make it ourselves?"

"Unless you have pretty strong hopes, better let them out. They are not in the humor for being fooled, and I'm not sure but what I am a little off color with them, any how."

"All right. When the time comes, we'll drop out of the procession. I have some things to tell you, any how."

They said no more at this time, and separated, but by and by they seized an opportunity to lag behind, and then turn aside from the course of the party.

"We've got a good mile now, and I am not dead sure I can strike in the dark the point I want to make; but it is worth the trial. Funny that Right Bower knows so little about the land which lies right over their noses."

Ante Art was keen of scent, however, and seemed to be guided by an almost unerring instinct. Now and then they advanced through a broad streak of moonlight, as often they were plunged in deep shadow; but all the time he never hesitated.

Finally, he called a halt.

"Here we are, and if my memory don't go back on me, I think I can find material for a torch or two. If I can't we are about at the end of our string. I don't want to visit the place I have in my mind without a light."

He had little trouble in finding the stuff, however, and in a few minutes was pointing out the dark, narrow opening which pierced the bank in a secluded spot.

This rift in the rock they entered, and pushed their way along over the rocky floor of the crevice—for it was little more.

How far they had gone they could not have told, but, in spite of occasional difficulties, they made rapid progress, and suddenly came upon the object of their search!

She was crouching in a little, huddled heap, and stared at them, blinking meantime at the light, as though she were some wild beast driven to its den. White, haggard, her clothing tattered, and marks of blood on her face and hands, she looked little like the young lady who, a short time ago, had been the delight of the eyes of Right Bower.

"Thank heaven, we have found you alive, Miss Munson. You are safe now!"

The exclamation of Steelgrip was reassuring, and she tottered to her feet.

"Yes, at last! Take me to Right Bower. I would sooner face every and any danger there than have another hour of life like this. Had you not come, in a little while more I would have been dead. I had my weapon ready. I could not stand it alone in the blackness, nor could I go a step farther. But, I am stronger now."

"Foolish child! You should have known that help would come. Ante and I will carry you—at least, to a better resting place."

"No, no! I can walk. Just a moment to recover my wits, and then I can go with you. Perhaps I may need your arm for a bit, but I will not weigh heavy."

She spoke brokenly, and as though fearful she would be counted a trouble which they might be tempted to rid themselves of by flight. The Gold Sport thought himself that she was on the very verge of lunacy—and no wonder. Surely, she had gone through with enough to unbalance the strongest intellect. The wonder was she was still so rational.

Her step grew somewhat stronger as they advanced, and it began to seem possible she might even be able to make the journey to the town. Steelgrip hoped it would not have to be on foot, but he was not sure his horse would be found where he left it.

Good luck was once more with him, however, and eventually he was turning his mustang's head toward Right Bower, while Ida, seated behind him, clung to his waist, and Ante Hughes strode along at his stirrup leather.

As they advanced it seemed to Steve that, while Miss Munson grew stronger in body, she became more unsettled in mind.

The reaction after her late danger and hardships might account for that, and yet it puzzled him somewhat, because from the few times she spoke he made out that she looked with distress on the return to Right Bower. He had a keen head on him, and felt an intuition that if she had the opportunity she would even attempt to escape from him, though how she could doubt he was a friend was more than he could understand, except on the ground of temporary insanity.

Under such circumstances it was not advisable to lead her to talk concerning her late adventures, nor to bring up any matters connected with them.

This was rather hard lines on the two men, but they managed to keep a conversation going, after a fashion, so that the journey was not made under the depressing influences of utter silence. Steve's plan was to get her quietly into town, and after Dr. Mudge had seen that she had any medical attention necessary,

wait for the soothing influences of a long rest.

That scheme was a good one; but the best laid plans are liable to go wrong, and just at present Right Bower was not to be depended on.

"By heavens, Ante!" Steve exclaimed, "I believe they are after the youngster again! I thought when Fan promised to hide him that he was safe, but that racket means the vigilantes are out again. They hang on to that trail like Satan himself. I wouldn't wonder if they were wrecking the Latter End. I can't leave a woman till I have seen her into safety, but you get into the mob as soon as you can, and do your best for the youngster. I will be with you soon. We'll both stand a good chance of having our fool necks stretched if we try to stand in the way of the crowd."

In the town, which now lay near at hand, a sudden uproar had arisen, and it seemed as though, late though the hour might be—or early in the morning—the whole population had emptied itself upon the street.

At another time there might have been something surprising about that, but not now.

After the excitement of two attempted lynchings, and the more than suspected abduction of Miss Munson from the very side of her murdered uncle, the nerves of none were too well composed, and but few slept with eyes more than half shut.

Torches began to flare in the streets; the tramp of footsteps was heard from every quarter; there were shouts and shots; men got together into little knots as they came upon the street, and all converged toward a single spot—the cabin of Bob Erricson!

Ante Art, seized with the infection, without a parting word, dashed away. Even Steve could not stand the temptation, for he suddenly turned the head of his horse in the same direction!

The tumult was having a strange effect on Miss Munson. She did not seem now to care to get down, for she cowered closer to the man around whose waist her arms were clasped. Once, she whispered in his ear:

"If the worst comes to the worst, you will not let them hang me?"

"Hang nothing!" he answered brusquely. "There will be nothing of the kind done here to-night. Rough though Right Bower may be, a woman is always safe there."

And as he spoke he thought to himself. "A good thing for Faro Fantine that it is so!"

After that he had another place for his thoughts, and it seemed to him there must have been some strange developments during his absence.

As he came up it was evident that there had been something of a struggle. A little knot of determined men were apparently on guard, and in them Steve recognized friends and attaches of Fantine.

They were facing the crowd with firmness, but Steelgrip knew that if the general attack which seemed to be threatened really came, they must either stand aside, or go down before it.

Evidently the Fantines intended to hold the fort against anything but overpowering numbers, while those who were turned toward the building were chafing, but unwilling to come to a battle until the coming reinforcements had gathered at the spot.

All this Steve took in as he approached, and then he saw Poker Paul come to the front.

"Go lightly, boys! Bob and his wife are square in their way, and we don't want them; but the murderer is in there, and we are bound to have him out. Stand aside there, you fools, or Right Bower will crush you. Forward all!"

At that moment Faro Fantine sprang upon the doorstep.

"Men of Right Bower! It is all a lie. The man you seek is not here; of that I pledge you my word. If the crowd moves forward you wreck the home of

Bob Erricson, and kill his wife. Have you no regard for a woman who is already near to death?"

"Bring him out yerself, Fan!" yelled a voice from the crowd, and it was choroused by a dozen others.

"No, no! I tell you he is not here! Go wreck the Latter End, if you must pillage and destroy, but here I swear you do not pass!"

With eyes flaming, and a look of defiance on her fine face, she stood with one hand upraised. A thrill ran through the crowd as it was recognized that something desperate would have to be done before they could see the inside of that cabin. As yet she had not produced a weapon, but that would come next, for Faro Fantine was in deadly earnest.

She was, and would have fought to the death in support of her defiance. Paul Wayland had provided for that, since it was no part of his game to have her harmed, though it was his hand which had collected this ugly crowd.

While she stood there in momentary silence, looking down upon the roaring crowd, three or four men sprung at her from opposite sides, and as her hand dropped to her breast Wayland caught her around the waist.

In another moment she would have been hustled off into the crowd had not a single man darted to her rescue. His hand darted out straight as a line, and his clenched fist fell upon Poker Paul's brow, driving the gambler a dozen yards away.

"Now!" he shouted, tearing off the wide-brimmed hat which had concealed his face, and dashing it away.

"You were calling for Tom Gregory, and he is here! He is an innocent man, but do your worst with him! Only, I swear before high heaven that yonder woman is forsworn!"

He pointed straight across to where, seated behind Steelgrip, and high above the crowd, the figure of Ida Munson appeared!

There were a few seconds of silence, broken by a woman's scream; and then, with louder roar than ever, the crowd surged forward.

It seemed as though the end had come at last.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DROP OF THE CURTAIN.

"Hold there, all of you! I cannot lie again. He is innocent!"

The shrill cry of Ida Munson rose above the turmoil, but it was coming too late. Already a dozen strong hands were on Gregory, and he would have fared horribly in that moment when the lately crouching beasts had seized their prey had it not been for the one friend at his elbow.

Faro Fantine never left him; and it was her voice which really was heard.

"There, there! You have him. He has given himself up. Are you going to be brutes?"

"No, by heavens! But this time he hangs, and this hand never lets go until he rises to the rope!" exclaimed one of the men spoken to.

It might have proved an idle boast, for the thirst for blood had risen to a ravening hunger, and even Steelgrip Steve saw that it would be madness to hope for anything but speedy death.

Only a miracle could save him from being trampled to death in that furious press, and—the miracle happened!

Steve saw it first of all, and his voice arose like a roar of thunder.

"The dead is alive! Here is Munson himself, come back to tell you the boy is innocent! Stop this, all you white men, till we learn the truth. Look! Look!"

It was hard for even his stout lungs to reach them, and had he had any less startling news, and had he not been aided by others who saw, his stentorian voice would have been lost.

But others saw, and fell back until something like a superstitious terror

throbbed through the mob. A trifle more would have started a panic.

The door of the cabin had opened, and, on the threshold, supported by Erricson, stood Major Munson, or his ghost!

In the hush of intense surprise he raised his hand and spoke in a weak, thready voice:

"There are a hundred here who know me. I am not dead. That young man never harmed me. No one is to blame but myself. I am too weak now to tell more, but I am sure I will recover. Then, all will be explained. For heaven's sake, go away quietly now, and allow me to rest!"

He staggered back as he ceased speaking, and the closing door shut him from view.

Then there was a louder roar than ever; but this time it was not one of anger.

In spite of this request the human wave surged nearer. Some cared little whether he lived or died so that their curiosity was gratified, and this wonderful mystery explained. They would even have invaded the cabin had it not been for the Faro queen, who rallied her friends, and put a narrow, living wall in front of the door.

One thing was certain. After this much of a revelation Tom Gregory was safe, and a dozen hands were grasping at his in congratulation.

No one went to bed in Right Bower for the balance of the night, and the saloons did a thriving business, which even the early approach of morning did not interrupt.

In the hubbub which followed the revelation, Steelgrip Steve was wise enough to get Ida Munson out of the way. He had heard her avowal if Right Bower had not, and coupling that with the statement of the major, he was afraid she might find the people inclined to be disagreeable over the way she had played them.

And Steve knew now there must be still more mystery about it, especially as the young lady had no desire to meet her uncle; so she allowed Steve to take her to the hotel without a word.

He had a strong idea that Faro Fantine could give him the key to the mystery, and when in the course of the morning, opportunity offered, he sought an interview.

It was granted without hesitation, and when Fantine entered the room at the hotel where he was waiting for her, he saw that she came in a friendly spirit.

"I do not know that you have any authority to ask questions, which I certainly would not answer from any one else, but I know you saved the life of that miserable boy, and as I feel somewhat responsible for him, I am willing to explain what you may safely know. What is it you would ask?"

"First off then, is the major going to live?"

"He is."

"Then how in the name of wonder did you come to get mixed up with him, and what was the meaning of that young lady bringing what I believe she knew was a false charge?"

"Major Munson revived, if he did not come to his senses, while the trial was going on, and left of his own accord. It was natural he should come to me, because he discovered not long ago that I was his own disowned daughter, who, from the time he had driven her out for refusing to obey his wife, had been the same as dead to him.

"Under other circumstances, we might never have been reconciled, but after what has happened, I think we will be father and daughter again. My step-mother is dead."

"And why did you not tell the truth, and save Gregory when they were going to lynch him at the Latter End?"

"Because my father, having taken refuge at Erricson's and sent for me, barely had strength to pledge me to utter silence until he either died or recovered. I believe now that his fears were exag-

gerated, but he had reason to believe that his safety required it."

"But, why did his niece—I suppose she is that—bring such an accusation against Gregory? What, too, is the mystery of her presence among the outlaws?"

"For the first part—self-defense. I have reason to believe that it was Ida Munson who struck the almost fatal blow. The fact that my extra dealer turned out to be the leader of the outlaws explains what might have been a puzzle. To a certain extent, Burke seems to have fascinated her. When Right Bower rose against him no doubt she refused to share his flight, but he took her by force. Perhaps he was a witness of her crime—if crime it is to be called. The girl is mad, and though she was willing to become his heiress, yet she has, no doubt, and without being suspected, all the months she has been here, nourished an idea of vengeance, though I doubt not the man she would have slain was more sinned against than sinning. There was a woman in the case, and another man, who was killed."

"Great Scott, what a revelation! What is to be done with her?"

"Nothing. She has had her lesson. In fact, she has her reward in a substantial shape, if she is sane enough to enjoy it. A man has come in search of her. If she misses one fortune, she gets another, which is waiting for her back east. I have seen her and told her to go—by this time she is probably gone. That is all I can tell you now, and is nearly as much as I know myself."

"What a snarl to all come out straight. And Gregory, who carried himself like a man, will be a little hero now. After the way he handled Poker Paul, too, he can set up for a chief and nobody say him nay."

"That is the very point I most regret. He has made a deadly enemy of Wayland, and the gambler is a dangerous man to face."

"Have no fears on that account. He has found it convenient to leave the town. He had rather a closer business connection with Billy Burke than has appeared on the surface. He may come back, some time, of course; but sufficient to the day! Perhaps you will not always remain here?"

"Heavens, no! The Small Hopes has given out, but there is enough in the military chest for a campaign abroad, and I think it is likely we will make it. Of one thing be sure: A month from now Right Bower will know me no more."

"I suppose she will lose Citizen Tom Gregory at the same time," Steve suggested, with a smile, as he turned away; but to that Fantine answered never a word.

Probably the reader asks for no farther explanation, and there surely is no space here for a sequel. Of one thing he can be sure: Poker Paul did not win either Fantine nor the fortune her father was able to give her. Whether Tom Gregory would persevere and win was a mooted question among several of the observant ones, who noted that the disappearance of the young man was coincident with the departure of the Munsons.

Gold-Sport Steve and Ante Art departed also, and Hezekiah Coffin went along with them.

As Steve settled back in his coach seat he relieved his mind to his fellow-travelers to the east:

"There, Coffin, was a campaign that was a failure! Ante and I went down to hunt for Captain Diamond ourselves, as well as to look after some counterfeiters who had been working in that region. They had their headquarters in the house that Munson bought shortly before we got there, and I confess, at times, I was a little suspicious of him. It was the old gang which prepared that secret passage, of which I had heard, and I suspect that Burke and Paul Wayland were connected with them, but I have not decided who was the head center, or what

became of him. But we'll have him yet, when the time comes."

"An' Posy Pete—he air my mutton," suggested Hezekiah. "He's played roots on me w'unst, but he can't dew it ag'in!"

"You be glad and thankful he let you down so easy. I've known of more than one man who went out after him and never returned alive. You are a game sort of a man, Hezekiah, but it strikes me you are not exactly cut out for detective work. You might pull off one big coup, but after that every wrongdoer would spot you if you got within a hundred miles."

"Mebbe yew air right," assented the Yankee, reflectively, as the coach rolled down the grade; "but ef I could corral that ten thousand on Diamond I would feel more like quittin'. Ef I ever dew go inter it ag'in, you bet I'll know more about my pards than I did ov Posy Pete; but ef, honest Injin, he'd bin a detective, what a gor'jus wun he'd hev made!"

THE END.

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